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G BOOKS ISSUE

PUBLISHING: APOCALYPSE AND HOPE

The confusion over who reads and why and whether their numbers are declining has its bright side. It allows us to see that book publishing is unique—the one industry for which there is still no rational accounting. In this it mimics reading itself, that mysteriously acquired skill, that magical activity which no amount of dissection by means of phonics or dancing letters on *Electric Company* can "deconstruct" or explain. Are there books for readers and readers for books? No one seems to be sure.

In every decade we are treated to a pair of conventional responses to our anxiety about reading. The first, the jeremiad, typified last year by Thomas Whiteside's *The Blockbuster Complex*, prophesies doom and looks back fondly on a mythical age when publishers were men of letters whose hands never touched money. The second, the work of social anthropology like the recent book by Lewis Coser et al., *The Culture and Commerce of Publishing*, goes to the African village of publishing and reports on how they cook the meat. Neither tells us much more than that something is amiss in the marketing and distribution of books, and this we already knew. But as the pieces in this special books issue attest, there *are* readers out there, some of them in the most outlandish places. That books have generated excitement where we expect it least should be an encouraging sign for an industry whose worst sin is that it has lost confidence in reading as a unique and irreplaceable activity, in the power of a book to advance an idea as no other medium can. "Reading is fundamental," say the literacy crusaders, who do not always feature the more fundamental point: reading is fun.

BOOKS AND READERS

TEEN ROMANCES
Margo Jefferson

ISHMAEL REED'S LITERARY ARMY
Stanley Crouch

POEMS AND READERS
Calvin Bedient

ERNEST CALLENBACH'S ECOTOPIAS
Kurt Vonnegut

PREPARING A NEW ARMS RACE?

BEHIND THE REAGAN 'START'

I. F. STONE

Washington, May 11

On Sunday morning, May 9, a few hours before President Reagan unveiled his new arms control initiative at Eureka College, an advance press briefing was held at Andrews Air Force Base. The "senior Administration officials" who took part—they cannot be identified under the rules—were smooth and facile as always, but they indicated by their hesitations and evasions that something significant was taking place behind the scenes in the Reagan Administration's overall defense strategy.

The heart of the matter is the SALT II treaty. A reporter asked whether the Administration would continue to abide by the provisions of SALT II during the coming negotiations or whether its previous commitment to honor the treaty was now to be suspended. This evoked a murky reply. A senior official acknowledged that the "existing position is that we would do nothing to undermine the existing agreements for as long as the other side observes the same restraints." But he added that the question involved "collateral restraints" to be negotiated. "I don't mean to call that into account," he continued. "The final conclusion on those constraints haven't [*sic*] been reached, but we don't anticipate that it will take long to do that."

The official transcript continues:

> Q. I'm not sure I understand the answer.
>
> Q. I'm not sure I understand the answer either.
>
> SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, that doesn't imply that we're going to depart from what is today our existing policy. But I will not go beyond that today, because the confirmation of that in the interdepartmental group is a matter that still has to be finalized. It is not

(*Continued on Page 611*)

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LETTERS.

ABBEY REVIEWS DRABELLE

Oracle, Ariz.

In his intended review of a book called *Down the River* ["Environments and Elitists," *The Nation*, May 1], Dennis Drabelle gives a good forthright description of the book's author. As the undersigned can testify from personal acquaintance, Edward Abbey is indeed an "arrogant," "xenophobic," "puerile," "smug" and "dopey" sort of fellow. So far, fair enough.

But what about the book? Drabelle never does get around to saying what the book is about. Rivers, maybe? It would appear that in his determination to review the author, Drabelle forgets to review the book.

Edward Abbey

WELCOME REFORMED WARRIORS

Newark, N.J.

I appreciate the determined stand *The Nation* has taken on the danger of nuclear war and the need for nuclear disarmament. And I do not criticize *The Nation*'s angry reaction to the belated statement by McGeorge Bundy, George Kennan, Robert McNamara and Gerard Smith as "churlish" [editorial, "Now They Tell Us," *The Nation*, April 24]. Although I sympathize with such anger, it may not be useful. We should welcome any and all changes of heart. The suggestion is put ironically, but why *not* "Former War Criminals for Peace"? After Vietnam many young men needed to deal with their own crimes, and it behooved us to deal compassionately with their confessions and soul-searchings.

As for George Kennan, I am particularly grateful to him for his article in *The New York Review of Books* about a year ago. It affected me deeply and got me started on my personal participation in the movement against nuclear war. It probably got me started reading *The Nation* again!

I urge *Nation* readers who are social scientists to participate in an international conference on June 4-6 at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. For further information write "Social Scientists and Nuclear War," Graduate Center, CUNY, 33 West 42nd Street, New York, N.Y. 10036; or telephone (212) 691-2673.

Howard E. Gruber

VIETNAMESE AGGRESSION

New York City

U. S. and Chinese policies along with Cambodian and Laotian resistance are inflicting pain on Vietnam in order to make it withdraw its troops from its western neighbors. The humanitarianism of sending food and reconstruction aid to Vietnam has to be weighed against the negative impact on the Cambodians and Laotians striving for national independence. Don Luce does not make this point explicitly in his article "Making Vietnam 'Feel Pain'" [*The Nation*, March 27]. And he makes a number of questionable assertions in arguing for a change in U.S. policy.

He writes: "America's support of China and its refusal to use diplomatic influence to try to forestall China's February 1979 invasion of Vietnam has predictably thrown the Vietnamese into the Soviet embrace." Actually the sequence of key events began earlier. Vietnam's alliance with Moscow and its entry into Comecon took place in late 1978. These were preparations—as was the expulsion of Chinese living in Vietnam—for the invasion of Cambodia, which had been planned by Hanoi ten months earlier, in February 1978. Soviet arms and consultants arrived in time for the invasion.

Luce says: "The Vietnamese would obviously rather carry on their fight against the forces of Pol Pot on foreign soil, and that is why they keep some 200,000 troops in Cambodia." This is a convoluted way of justifying the Vietnamese invasion as a pre-emptive strike. There is no evidence that the Pol Pot regime, alone or in alliance with China, was planning to invade Vietnam.

Luce, and T. D. Allman also, believe that most Cambodians are grateful for the Vietnamese presence as long as a restoration of the calamitous Pol Pot regime is possible. Certainly the Khmer Rouge, despite its recent moves toward moderation, is paying a high political price for its past misdeeds. But the resistance to the Vietnamese is tenacious and appears to have broadened in the last two years.

I note that Luce applies the word invasion only to China's in-and-out assault on Vietnam and not to Vietnam's continuing aggression. He has nothing to say about Vietnam's takeover of Laos, where there was no counterpart to the Pol Pot regime.

Are there circumstances that justify invasions? I tend to think that in this era of superpowers, nation states and a surfeit of weapons, we ought to cling to the principle of the integrity of frontiers and resist temptations to excuse and appease interventionists.

Hugh Deane

LUCE REPLIES

New York City

Inflicting pain on Vietnam is not forcing Vietnamese troops to withdraw from Cambodia and Laos. Providing weapons and other aid to Pol Pot, as has been pointed out by many Cambodian scholars, makes occupying Vietnamese troops acceptable to most Cambodians, who fear that Pol Pot's troops will use U.S. and Chinese weapons for another period of executions to rival the genocide of the 1975 to 1978 period. Inflicting pain and destabilizing countries is not the way to help people strive for national independence.

I should have pointed out in my article that the buildup of Chinese troops on the Vietnamese border and the hostilities between Vietnam and China began before the expulsion of Chinese living in Vietnam (with which I disagree) and, of course, long before the Chinese invasion of Vietnam. As China became a greater threat, Vietnam moved closer to Russia. And the evidence that "the Pol Pot regime, alone or in alliance with China, was planning to invade Vietnam" is that it was already invading Vietnam. Several Vietnamese villages in the southern delta were destroyed by Pol Pot's forces before the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia.

I agree with Hugh Deane on his last point: let us cling to the integrity of borders and let us not try to overthrow governments. It is in the best interests of neither the United States nor Vietnam for the United States to continue inflicting pain on (i.e., overthrowing) Vietnam. Nor is it in the best interests of the Cambodians for the United States to vote for Pol Pot at the United Nations, supply him with weapons and give him food through the voluntary agencies. Instead, we should search for a political solution.

In the meantime, I urge everyone to help provide milk for the Vietnamese children through the American Friends Service Committee, 1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19102. We can be friends with the Vietnamese and other peoples of the world. Let's use our energies to that end.

Don Luce

SAUDI STUDY AVAILABLE

Washington, D. C.

Fouad Ajami's excellent discussion of William Quandt's book on Saudi Arabia ["Imperialism Without Splendor," *The Nation*, April 10] mentioned the fine work of Ghassane Salameh on the Saudi state and society. Salameh's opus is in Arabic and therefore not accessible to many people in this country.

Nation readers might like to know that excerpts of his work have been published in *MERIP Reports* ("Saudi Arabia on the Brink," #91). This issue is available for $2.75 from Middle East Research & Information Project, Box 1247, New York, N.Y. 10025.

Joe Stork, Editor
MERIP Reports

The Nation welcomes letters—typed, double-spaced and no longer than 300 words, please. Longer letters may be edited for reasons of space. Our policy is to publish as many letters as space permits, but inevitably a backlog develops, so bear with us.

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EDITORIALS.

Falklands' Future

The sad little war in the South Atlantic is not about the Falklands' future. It is about Britain's past: a colonial past that it was not quick enough in giving up, a gunboat past that it still thinks will endow it with the illusion of imperial strength. Entrapped in this history, Britain is apparently hellbent to retake the Falklands at any cost of lives and materiel—to win them back so that, as *The Financial Times* of London has put it, it can give them away properly.

For give them away it must. One way or another, no matter how long the bloodshed goes on, no matter who "wins" the war, the Falklands will never go back to being a British colony. The question only remains—and this is really at the heart of the negotiations at the United Nations—as to what kind of sovereignty arrangement Britain and Argentina will be able to agree on for the islands' future.

Fortunately for all parties, there is a surprising array of models from which a solution can be chosen. The "Hong Kong solution" has been mentioned often: a scheme by which Britain acknowledges Argentina's sovereignty formally but then leases back the islands for ninety-nine years either to administer the islands or to let the people govern themselves as they like. But there are many other examples, each with important variances that might be particularly apt here: Andorra, a "co-principality" that has been under the joint suzerainty of France and the Spanish bishopric of Urgel since the thirteenth century; Monaco, an independent principality but under French "guardianship" with the proviso that, should the Rainier succession end, it would become an autonomous state under a French protectorate; Greenland, a nominal part of Denmark but with home rule and its own Parliament governing all matters except defense and foreign relations. And for still other arrangements: the Canal Zone, West Berlin at various stages since World War II, even American Indian reservations.

In fact, it may be that a Falkland settlement along one of these patterns could come to represent a new type of

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sovereignty in international law. Something of the kind might well be the solution for Northern Ireland and the West Bank, for the Basques and the Kurds, for Quebec and Eritrea and Croatia and Puerto Rico and Lebanon and Brittany . . . and all those other trouble spots where issues of sovereignty and self-rule prevail.

Perhaps nationalism as we have known it in the last century is simply outdated and the nation-state an outmoded form of sovereignty. If Britain and Argentina will get on with the business of working out a fair and harmonious settlement on the Falklands' future, there is a hope that they can make of the "Falklands solution" a new and lasting instrument of international diplomacy.

Beast of Prayer

Perhaps we are fortunate. When the Argentine junta saw its support crumbling, it invaded the Falklands. When Margaret Thatcher found her popularity at its lowest ebb, she reacted as though General Galtieri's troops had landed at Liverpool. But so far Ronald Reagan's principal response to his decline in the opinion polls is only to assault the Constitution by proposing an amendment to allow "voluntary prayer" in public schools.

Though it will probably take an arduous struggle, we predict that the First Amendment will survive this assault intact. Ultimately, we expect that few Americans will be taken in by the attempt to portray Supreme Court decisions prohibiting state-organized religious worship in the schools as restrictions on "voluntary" prayer. And since a constitutional amendment cannot be adopted quickly, there should be ample time to expose all the chicanery involved in our President's diversionary tactic.

Nonetheless, we will watch developments in this area closely, paying particular attention to which among our political leaders speak up early and forcibly. We trust that the majority of them will not choose to regard this as a sacrosanct apple-pie issue—which, like motherhood and the flag, cannot be opposed because so many seem to favor it. For if they ignore this assault on the Constitution, they will learn they cannot eat their pie and have it, too.

Eureka Euthenics

Did President Reagan really find anything new in his Eureka ("I have found it") speech of May 9 on nuclear arms reduction? Anything, that is, beyond an obvious way to try to defuse the rapidly growing opposition to the arms race and thus a passport for his June visit to Europe?

It is just possible that he did. As I. F. Stone points out elsewhere in this issue, he seems to have found a way to abandon the SALT II agreements, which Secretary Haig now says are "dead" but which exist in some shadowy afterlife tacitly recognized by both sides. He also seems to have found a reed which, however slim, the Russians may be willing to cling to: they have indicated that the Eureka speech could be a basis for negotiations despite its inevitable tilt against their doomsday system as opposed to ours.

The Soviet reaction reflects, we are tempted to think, a recognition that the need to stabilize—or stop destabilizing—the nuclear balance is paramount for everyone in the world today. Indeed, if the balance is to be achieved, it is exactly "everyone"—the citizens, the people—who will have to do the job. The experts are ready to spoil it all with their technical quibbles about "throw weight" and "launchers" and the like. Only pressures from the people, a sort of victims' lobby from all over, can have a chance of making the issue political and thus keeping it out of the military's hands. That is one reason the June 12 disarmament rally in New York City is so important.

Every study of Soviet popular feeling, however constrained, shows strong antiwar majorities. In this country, polls such as the *Newsweek* survey of April 26 indicate at least 60 percent in favor of the nuclear freeze.

These are the pressures behind "Eureka" and the Kremlin's reaction to it. If they lessen, the nuclear clock will move rapidly toward midnight.

Force Plays

"Believe me," Ronald Reagan wrote to me, "I'm not asking everyone to join this club [the Republican Presidential Task Force]—only proud, flag waving Americans like you who I know are willing to sacrifice to keep our nation strong." I don't want to boast, but "Ronald Reagan" "personally" issued this invitation to me twice. That is, I got two of these letters, both in the same week, asking for funds to help "keep our Republican majority status in the Senate." The other one went to "Clair Clark" at an old address in another state.

Students of the science of direct mail tell me that I owe the honor of this double appeal to computerized demographics. I would rather look on these two letters from the President as a signal honor for an American citizen. President Lincoln, to be sure, wrote letters to anguished mothers and widows and other troubled citizens during the Civil War. But, as far as I know, never twice to the same person in the same week. That is my distinction.

However, I must admit that I may not be unique. It turns out that my Reagan letter, "my personal invitation now to join this Task Force," was, according to *The New York Times*, one of 16 million he prepared, of which 8 million were actually mailed.

What happened to the other 8 million "personal" letters, you might ask? Well, the truth is they were destroyed in what must have been the biggest shredding operation since wheat became a breakfast cereal. Eight million letters in ribbons! A whole forest of mashed solicitation! And that includes, in addition to the three-page letter, the Acceptance Certificate (asking a mere $120 from those who sign), the

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return envelope and the four-color sheet detailing the "Benefits of Membership" in the task force.

The benefits, by the way, include a publication wonderfully entitled *The Force* which, we potential Star Warriors are told, goes only to Presidential Task Force members and gives us "a special insider's briefing on the real stories behind what's happening at the White House, on Capitol Hill and around the world." All this for only $120, payable over twelve months! And I haven't mentioned such perquisites as a "personally commissioned Medal of Merit" from the President, a lapel pin, a "unique full-size American Flag," a membership card, inscription on the President's Honor Roll and "Action-Alert" letters "from Senator Bob Packwood and other national leaders."

Now we must come to the matter of the shredding. It all has to do with Packwood, the Republican Senator from Oregon, chairman of the Senate Republican Campaign Committee. He is shown in the mailing, next to a four-color smiling Reagan, accepting appointment as "First Chairman of the Republican Presidential Task Force." But it seems that he has also been musing out loud about the problem with Reagan. Most recently he had the gall to say that Reagan had "removed the glue that held everyone together in the Republican party."

Packwood was obviously not playing follow The Leader. So Reagan untasked the task force and sent Packwood packing. Hence the shredding, at a cost of some $2 million. But then in May came a change of heart. Packwood promised, "I'm going to stick to my knitting," and Reagan said he could go back to being the chief campaign fund-raiser. The task force is still a dead letter—8 million of them—but all is well in G.O.P. ranks and the party is expected to raise over $100 million this year.

My own problem is how to find out what happens when you join a disbanded, disgraced task force and to make that discovery without contributing one cent to the Reagan cause. Send in the $120 and cancel the check at just the right time in the computer's cycle? Advice on tactics would be welcomed.

BLAIR CLARK

Reagan's START

(*Continued From Front Cover*)

contentious. I don't mean to mislead you there.

Q. But you agree that it implies that we will not depart from existing policy of—

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: —for the time being.

Q. —for the time being.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's right.

And so the matter was dropped. But the clear implication left by this puzzling colloquy is that while the Administration "for the time being" intends to continue its earlier commitment to SALT II, a final decision has yet to be made by some "interdepartmental group" apparently still debating the fine print of the new arms control proposal.

In other words, the Administration may be planning to scuttle SALT II under cover of START I, though to admit to jettisoning it at this point would raise a dark and threatening cloud over any new arms talks before they had even begun.

No further light on the status of SALT was cast by the President's own address later that afternoon. But it was put in new perspective shortly afterward in the little-noticed Democratic Party statement in response to the President's speech by former Secretary of State Edmund Muskie.

Muskie expressed alarm over a comment by White House counselor Edwin Meese 3d two days earlier that the Reagan Administration does not "feel bound by" the SALT II treaty if it interferes with military plans the Pentagon may be contemplating. "What troubles me about the program announced today by the President," Muskie said, "is that it may be a secret agenda for sidetracking *disarmament* while the United States gets on with *rearmament*." The Meese statement may mean that "we are declaring a 'free for all' for several years in the arms race, in which there will be no treaty constraints on arms for the first time since President Nixon signed the SALT I accords in 1972."

The former Secretary of State observed that this readiness to abandon SALT II contradicted "Secretary Haig's stated policy of living within the unratified treaty as long as the Soviets do the same," a policy he reiterated before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week. And he added that Gen. David C. Jones, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "continues to assert the military values of the treaty to this country's security, and he and others have stated that the Soviets are abiding by it."

Muskie's alarm about a "free for all" is made more understandable when one looks at a story on the Pentagon in the May 8 *Washington Post*. In it George C. Wilson reported that the Air Force and the Pentagon research office had "conditionally" approved a new basing-point system for the MX missile, the so-called "dense pack deployment," despite warnings from unnamed Air Force leaders that this new basing plan would violate Article IV of SALT II on the conversion and expansion of missile sites. This was confirmed to Wilson by William E. Jackson Jr., who was director of the arms control advisory committee in the Carter Administration.

For a fuller understanding of what those unnamed Air Force officers are warning of, let us turn back to Muskie's speech. He said that "the hard facts are that the Soviets are able to move faster than we to more dangerous weapons breakouts from the SALT II treaty. . . . They can quickly double or triple or quadruple the number of warheads on their land-based missiles—if SALT II is not observed. There is nothing comparable that we can do under the Reagan defense budget. Thus, this Administration may actually wind up *guaranteeing* that the Soviets achieve *superiority* [in land-based warheads]."

The way is wide open, in short, for an all-out arms race on both sides. The Reagan negotiating terms on START are ludicrously lopsided as it is. But to scuttle SALT II in advance and open the way to this heightened arms race even before the talks begin—what a START that would be! Congress ought to put its foot down before it's too late.

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ITEM. ITEM. ITEM.

IT ALL DEPENDS WHOSE GOOSE IS GORED

Pat Frank, one of four women in the forty-member Florida State Senate, recently gave her male colleagues a lesson in equal rights—or, as they used to say in pre-E.R.A. days, in "what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander."

The senators, reports Mim Kelber, were debating a bill restricting abortions and requiring a woman who wanted an abortion to notify her husband beforehand. Frank, a self-described moderate Democrat, proposed an amendment eliminating the notification requirement on the grounds that the husband might not be the father of the fetus. "We do have a section in our Constitution," she pointed out, "providing that individuals have a right to privacy."

Several male senators argued that the husband has a right to know of his wife's pregnancy because there is a legal presumption that he is the father and because he might want the child. Frank's amendment lost on a voice vote.

Then Frank announced that she had another amendment, requiring that if a married man gets a woman other than his wife pregnant and she intends to have an abortion, the wife must be given advance notice. "If the husband has the right to the possibility of preventing the abortion because he wants to have a child," Frank said, "then a woman who has a fertility problem may want to have a child that is her husband's by another woman." Shouts from the floor: "How could you do this?" "That's not fair!"

When Frank insisted on a recorded vote, some of her male colleagues hastily left the chamber. Her second amendment lost by two votes, but the anti-abortion bill was later removed from the Senate calendar.

THE NUCLEAR INDUSTRY: DON'T BLAME ME

In recent years the nuclear energy industry has blamed everyone but itself for its ills. At the American Nuclear Society's second annual press briefing in New York City this spring, industry representatives blamed politicians, short-sighted environmentalists, the media and an oppressive Nuclear Regulatory Commission that wraps the industry in a regulatory stranglehold. The industry claims the total bill for all the delays these groups force on it is $3 billion a year.

An overlooked report put out by the House Subcommittee on Environmental Energy and Natural Resources last fall, and uncovered for us by correspondent David Corn, shows that this picture is false. The report, entitled "Licensing Speedup, Safety Delay: NRC Oversight," concludes that the delays "likely to be experienced by utilities in obtaining operating licenses for physically completed nuclear powerplants [have] been substantially exaggerated," and puts the cost to electricity consumers at only $181.5 million. Moreover, the study finds that it is the utilities themselves which have done much to cause these delays, dragging their heels in resolving safety questions and repeatedly misstating construction completion schedules. "The magnitude of whatever delay can be attributed to the NRC," the report notes, "is a small fraction of the delay caused by utility errors, management problems and marketplace realities such as capital acquisition."

Unfortunately, the N.R.C. has yielded to industry pressure and introduced a number of initiatives to speed the licensing of new plants. The effect of that is to shift N.R.C. resources from other programs, particularly safety-related programs, and to limit the rights of citizen-intervenors and licensing boards to address health and safety questions. These initiatives, the study shows, are not only largely unnecessary but in some cases may be "inimical to nuclear safety" and "damaging to the public faith in the NRC as a genuine champion of the public health."

The subcommittee report found the N.R.C.'s lack of attention to vital safety protections a far greater problem than licensing delays. According to the report, the N.R.C. "has not effectively tracked the implementation" of safety requirements made in the wake of Three Mile Island, and it has fallen behind schedule in the crucial areas of emergency planning, fire protection, equipment qualification and on-site inspection.

The nuclear industry and the N.R.C. have misarranged their priorities. As the report notes, "A single major accident such as the TMI accident costs consumers and taxpayers many times the cost legitimately attributable to NRC licensing hearings and citizen contentions about safety problems." In complaining about delays, the industry is creating a smokescreen for its attack on the process that should guarantee public debate and safety, and is deliberately misleading the public and the government into seeking scapegoats for problems that rest at its own doorstep.

EL SALVADOR: LEMON-AID

It pays to have a little rebellion. Before El Salvador exploded into civil war, according to correspondent Jim Morrell, it was getting only $26 million in U.S. aid a year. This year it is getting $116 million in military aid—$19,000 per guerrilla—and $267 million in economic aid.

Much is made by the State Department these days about that ratio: since we are spending more than twice as much on economic aid as on military aid, we have proved our peaceful intentions. And it is quite true that $267 million is a tidy sum: if it were divided among the poorest 1 million Salvadorans, it would more than double the average annual household income of $1,358 to nearly $3,230.

But in fact, of course, less than 10 percent of our economic aid is even intended for the poor. Most of it goes to bolster government finances, help out the balance of payments and—true to Reagan's faith in the "magic of the marketplace"—pump up the private sector.

Private sector support—$77 million worth—is actually the biggest single economic item in the fiscal 1983 foreign aid proposal for El Salvador. Way down on the list is land reform, now getting only $16 million.

Yes, there is a lot of economic aid. But it ultimately serves the same purpose as the military aid: to outfit the government for a long war.

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BOOKS & THEIR READERS

Sweet Dreams for Teen Queens

MARGO JEFFERSON

It seems appropriate to begin a piece on books for teen-age girls with the words of the adults who produce them.

"After years of being deluged with young adult books dealing with the unhappy realities of life, such as divorce, pregnancy outside of marriage, alcoholism, mental illness, and lately child abuse, teenagers seem to want to read about something closer to their daily lives." (Wildfire Romances)

"Caprice Romances are contemporary young adult first-love novels that will express the restlessness of youth and the wonder of falling in love."

"Each Sweet Dreams romance features a heroine who is about sixteen years old—an ordinary, middle-class suburban girl, with a family to match. The romantic interest, a boy of the same age or a little older, should appear early in the story—the sooner the better."

"The tension in these novels lies in the heroine's struggles with common adolescent problems, her romantic fantasies as opposed to the realities, and in her desire to define herself. . . . The ending of a First Love, though, is always upbeat."

"Wishing Star . . .plots should deal with some of the more serious problems of young girls today, like divorce, school difficulties, loneliness, death, parental things, etc. No books will deal with sexual matters, like abortion, unmarried pregnancy, affairs. There should, however, be a romance in every book."

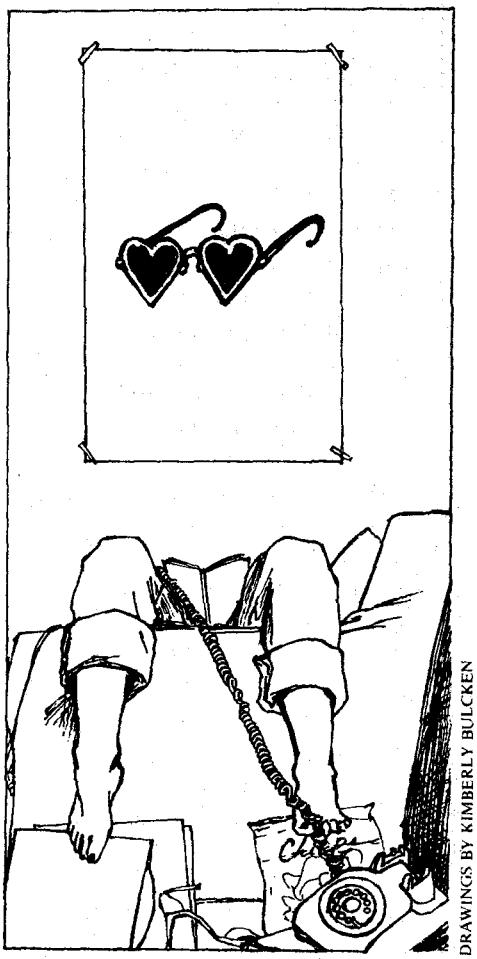
"Our young people are not unaware of sex. They 'make-out' and may have the first stirrings of sexual desire but description must be sensitively handled and they will not follow through on their desires." (Caprice)

"Lastly, there should be no profanity, no religious references, and no explicit sex. We endorse hugging and kissing, of course. Where would romance be without them?" (Sweet Dreams)

You can find these books in the young adult sections of bookstores, sometimes displayed in white plastic racks, sometimes in boxed sets, prettily done up in pink with touches of blue, mauve and dove gray. You can also find them in shopping malls and advertised in the brochures of teen book clubs owned by Xerox and by Scholastic Books, which brought out the first of these series, the Wildfire Romances, in 1979. Teen romances bring their publishers millions in sales, and the publishers are willing to lavish millions on advertising in return. Although the romances were originally marketed through schools and libraries, Bantam, Simon and Schuster, Scholastic, and Grosset and Dunlap have now captured a large trade audience as well. They have an eye to the future and say they want their girl readers to experience a literary upward mobility that will allow them to move (eventually) from *Small Town Summer* and *I'm Christy* to *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*.

These books, which cost less than $2 for some 200 pages of text where words that exceed two syllables are kept to a tasteful minimum, reproduce rapidly, at the rate of two new titles per series each month. Bookstores usually shelve them very near their adult romance counterparts, but you can distinguish between them immediately. The covers of adult romances feature illustrations of exotic fantasy; the teen ones offer photographs of adolescent models gazing into a boyfriend's, a mentor's or the camera's eye with tender, lively or sweetly mournful expressions. Grown-up girls are expected to kick off their shoes and abandon reality with a defiant toss of the head. Teen-age girls are supposed to wander in a state of suspension where fantasy and reality cannot be torn asunder. You fix your hair, put on a record, turn a few pages of *In My Sister's Shadow*, watch television, go through your Sweet Dreams slumber party kit, call your best friend, try to decide whether to wear the pink, the yellow or the white sweater tomorrow and gaze at the face on the cover of *Terri's Dream*.

If, dear adult reader, you're confused as to which decade you're in, you'd be no less so if you'd actually read a few of these books. I did, and I found that they're grown-up nostalgia repackaged for the young, very like those remakes of 1950s and 1960s songs done by people in their 30s and 40s pretending to be ten or twenty years younger. It's the silliest sort of ventriloquism: sentimentality about one's own past, piped through the mouths of another generation. The titles alone betray their authors' generation. Remember Ray Milland in *The Lost Weekend* when you read about teen-age alcoholism in *The Lost Summer*; see Pat Boone and Shirley Jones stroll through the woods when you read about teen-agers on a farm in *An April Love Story*. Fuse the Gershwin brothers with the Jefferson Airplane when you read *Please Love Me . . . Somebody* or *Someone To*



DRAWINGS BY KIMBERLY BULCKEN

Margo Jefferson, formerly of Newsweek, *teaches journalism at New York University.*

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Love. One writer is named Veronica Ladd (all these writers are women, or at least all have women's names—the girls' and ladies' book world has always supported a few men who use female pen names). V. L. dedicates her novel to "L. L.: Romantic Hero, Leading Man in My Private Movie."

Listen to the voices of these modern teen-agers as they are rendered by the writers of young adult fiction in a language taken from old soap operas and magazines: " 'Lisa, beautiful Lisa,' Rick murmured as he turned her toward him, 'You will always be surrounded by flowers and love.' " "Dan seemed to be mine, all mine," one heroine declares. Another meets the boy of her dreams when he seeks shelter from a storm in her "simple country kitchen."

> "I'll get you a towel." Another crash of thunder interrupted her words. . . . "The lightning's close," she shuddered, frozen in place.
>
> "As long as we're inside we're safe," Jeff reassured her soothingly.
>
> (*Terri's Dream*)

One pair of aspiring teen rock stars dreams of being the new Sonny and Cher, but their school dances feature The Bump, The Hustle and The Funky Chicken, all nearly ten years out of date.

Yes, but if these books are so false, why do teen-age girls buy them? And why was I unable to put any one of them down once I'd begun reading, despite being enraged or sickened? Well, they're written according to a formula, and the formula is as neat and efficient as that of sitcoms or pop songs or the advertising ditties we commit to memory in spite of ourselves. But the formula also reflects our earliest learning experiences—the belief that good behavior brings rewards, bad behavior punishments; the notion that a threatening world can be made benign and orderly through external means (magic and fate) or internal means (conformity and submission).

Fairy and folk tales depend on these primitive notions, as do any number of literary classics that appear on the approved reading lists of high-schoolers. Think of Dickens, the Brontës, Jane Austen, and Shakespeare's comedies: fortunes are whisked away and rebestowed, lost parents and relations are found suddenly and lost again if necessary, siblings are joined in matched-set marriages. But of course there's so much more; the classics permit a range of responses and readings. The young adult romances allow only one of two responses—you can either reject them or comply with them, and they offer no compensations of setting, character or style.

Still, they do have one virtue that may be worth all their faults. They ease fears by offering just enough of the real to make the unreal seem irresistible and attainable. The reader of teen romances feels like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, lulled to sleep in the poppy field, or like one of those fictional children who trudge through snowy woods longing to lie down and sleep forever. Somehow the torpor of these romances, the lassitude of their writing and plotting, accommodates the beguiling somnambulance of adolescence—form trots obediently after function. It's all here: the yearning to be as conventional as possible, which coexists with the desire to be singled out as particularly worthy of love, admiration and success. Not that the books aren't filled with moral lessons; it's just that the lessons are small and dainty, like the feet and hands pretty girls were once supposed to have. Don't be slothful, snobbish or deceitful. Be a nice person and be well groomed. If your girlfriends and boyfriends are from a higher social class than you are, that proves people are just people. If they're from a respectably lower one, that proves the same thing. (The lack of *mise en scène* helps shield the mythologies of class difference from the realities.) Once a heroine has learned to be herself—to make good grades and get along with her parents and cultivate her athletic or artistic gifts diligently but without undue extravagance—she'll be given a boyfriend and a future full of vague promise. Happily ever after is the time it takes to finish one romance and begin another.

"Rumpelstiltskin" and "The Three Spinsters" are fairy tales that feature girls of humble birth who are hustled off to palaces to win princes with their spinning skills. Teen romance writers are spinning into straw whatever gold exists in our childish longings, but the raw materials of fairy tale and teen romance are the same. Dutiful daughters get good boys. The nasty little men and the ugly old women have been banished. The heroines are always talking about "learning to be me," but what a richly rewarded little me that is. I know that teen-age agonies, however shallow—not buying the right dress, not getting a place on the cheerleading squad—are genuine sorrows, but I wonder if they're not also propitiations of a sort: if we're not hoping, while we suffer, that this may be all life demands in the way of trials and tribulations. I noticed that even those teen romance heroines who are aspiring Olympic athletes or gifted fledgling artists never ask themselves what every teen-age girl would, has and does: Am I really talented? What will I do if I meet someone who has more talent? ("You must say what you really want most," Laurie tells Jo March in *Little Women*. "Genius," Jo answers, "don't you wish you could give it to me, Laurie?")

What happens when self-discovery has to be its own reward, when talent isn't enough and parents thwart one's wishes while boyfriends sulk and pull away? When Louisa May Alcott wasn't dashing off pseudonymous thrillers or—her words—"providing moral pap for the young," she wrote *Work*, a spirited and earnest look at the opportunities for employment, love and self-respect available to nineteenth-century middle-class women in America. What happens when teen-age girls discover what *Work*'s heroine, Christie Devon, did: that "it's *so* hard to be patient and contented when nothing happens as you want it to, and you don't get your share of happiness, no matter how much you try to deserve it." Our young adult romance writers remain silent on these points. Their publishers assure us that inexperienced young adult readers prefer it that way and are better off if such questions aren't asked.

Critics of teen romances, notably the Council on Interracial Books for Children, have excoriated them for sexism, racism and class smugness. All true, but it's fascinating to watch how the books try to accommodate modern views on such issues without endangering the status quo. Boys are offered as rewards here because they bring out the best in girls who are struggling to find themselves. Some of the boys are shy and sensitive, others are jock heroes eager to bring their shy, sensitive sides to light. The boy encourages the heroine to pursue her talent; he nurtures her efforts to be honest and independent. I'll be the feminist for you, he seems to be murmuring in soft but manly tones—I'll be man and woman for both of us. Parents are usually supportive and sketchily drawn, providing sitcom-style reproaches and rapprochements. Only

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divorced or separated parents, most often mothers, are given any dimension. That the writers only feel free to criticize those parents who have broken the marriage bond doesn't alter the fact that they are the most interesting parents in the books. Most broken marriages are mended by the book's end, of course, which is quite an accomplishment. A girl who reads more than three of these books will not only feel worthless if she doesn't have a boyfriend; she will feel worthless if her parents can't be reconciled in the real-life equivalent of 200 pages.

Given this landscape, it's hopeless to expect minority groups to be portrayed intelligently. Jews aren't mentioned directly, though an occasional Jewish-sounding name drifts across the page. (For instance, I found Jason Steiner, rejected as a possible date for Frannie Bronson in *The Popularity Plan* because he was "too loud.") Hispanics appear in walk-on parts and are treated with that squeamish courtesy that marks the appearance of a new Token in Our Town: Dr. Gomez, the "dark-skinned" physician, Mrs. Lopez, the art teacher "with just a trace of a Spanish accent." Blacks, who have had token status longer than Hispanics, play larger roles in several books—as school friends, as neighbors who behave like tough but loving housekeepers, or as maids who behave like loving but tough mothers and teachers. I came upon one Native American (the best friend of a wealthy white businessman's son) and no Asians.

Both a blind and a paralyzed girl appear in books from Wishing Star, the self-declared line of contemporary "non-sexual problem" books. So does a lot of wishful thinking. Blind Lee finds a shy, sensitive beau and passes for sighted at his school dance; paralyzed Andie finds a protectress in the mother of the drunk driver responsible for her condition. In not one of the books is there a whisper about homosexuality. Writers who feel obliged to countenance the occasional member of a minority group draw the line at homosexuals. And even if writers and publishers could decide what line to take, homosexuality would still raise the issues of sex—its force, its repercussions, its effect on identity—far too clearly.

The guidelines are distinct: the only lust allowed is the lust for romance and stability. Otherwise, titillation must suffice. And so heroines feel warm sensations and unbearable thrills at "his touch"; they are transfixed by his gaze and prey to "stabs" of excitement when he passes them in the hall. Dreams, which are "like being with him all night," are good for a few illicit snickers, and so are sports, especially horseback riding. ("Maura lifted into a hunt seat, squeezed her legs into Blackfire's sides, and the rhythm began—up, over, land, squeeze.") Only a few books mention "going all the way," and I found myself wondering, given the rising number of girls reading these novels and the rising number of girls getting pregnant, whether there was any overlap of the two constituencies. It is not impossible; it is, in fact, likely. What these books are really marketing is wishful thinking—the state of mind many teen-age girls are in when they experience intercourse, pregnancy, abortion or childbirth.

What do the writers of these books actually think about their products? I'm not sure, but they display a certain anxiety of influence, rapping the adult romances their readers will graduate to in a few years firmly on the knuckles. "He didn't have a rock jaw or Roman nose or pearly teeth, or any of the stock attributes of the heroes of the romantic novels she read by the dozens," says the heroine of *I've Got A Crush On You*. She's speaking of her high school English teacher, who will praise her poetic gift, admit that he could fall in love with her, but leave her free to pursue college, fame and a local boyfriend instead. Adult romances soften the brain and teach you a lot of outdated slang, a friend tells the heroine of *Dreams Can Come True*, who later exclaims, "Why couldn't things be the way they were in books? She had met the most important man in her life and he hadn't even looked at her. . . . Wryly, she thought of her silly little dreams she'd written in her secret notebook."

I'd like to leave you with brief summaries of my two favorite teen romances. *Honey* (Wishing Star) is about a young girl who lives with her mother in a Boston suburb. Father left them years ago; now all mother, who is from a fine old New England family, does is whine and read adult romances. Honey, who is a promising art student, cooks and cleans for both of them. Into this drudgery comes the family next door—the elegant Redfields of Mississippi, with their maid, Vanilla. Vanilla, as her

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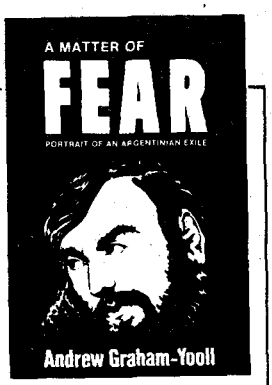

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3. The publishing industry continues to be swallowed up by corporate giants. There were 47 mergers in 1975, 58 in 1976, and 57 in 1977. Distribution is being taken over as well with two wholesalers controlling 60% of the wholesale market, while close to half (perhaps more) of all books are being sold through centralized chainstores.

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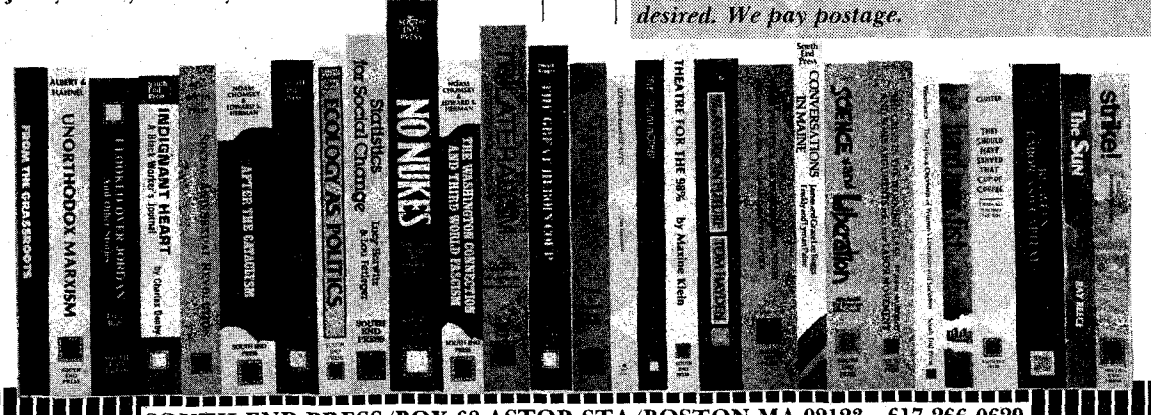

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name playfully indicates, is black, and not really a maid. The Redfields discovered her singing in a Las Vegas club to earn money for college tuition and were so impressed that they brought her into their home so she could earn her Boston University tuition by working for them. Suddenly, Honey's father returns, eager to make a new life for his family in Maine. The Redfields go off to Europe and Honey stays behind for a while, feeling deserted by everyone. But Vanilla, who has just graduated *summa cum laude*, sits her down and explains a few things about love and mothering. Honey's self-absorbed mother is only one slice of a "Mother Pie," Vanilla says; other slices are teachers, mentors and friends, even men. And, of course, "mean old chocolate Vanilla." So Honey goes happily off to Maine, leaving behind a boyfriend who will visit her regularly and taking with her the knowledge that it is still possible to make a loving mammy out of a college-educated maid.

P.S. I Love You (Sweet Dreams) tells of young Mariah and her dream of being a famous novelist like Rosemary Rogers or Kathleen Woodiwiss. She meets Paul Strobe in Palm Springs where she, her mother and her sister have gone to house-sit for the summer. Paul is from a wealthy but enlightened and artistic family; he befriends a Native American and his father writes novels and owns a bookstore. Paul wants to be an architect, and it is he who encourages Mariah to look beyond romantic novels to realistic ones. But shortly after they fall in love, Paul is stricken with cancer, and when Mariah returns to California he enters the hospital. She is loving and loyal throughout his decline, and when he dies her mother reminds her that "no true love story has a happy ending." But this one does. Mariah has grown through her pain; she is young and pretty, her parents are getting back together and she has a new typewriter. We know that when she is a little older her love story with Paul will be the subject of her first novel. She will take it to Paul's father, who, remembering her kindness to his son, will get it published and sell it in his bookstore.

And that's where we began—in bookstores, where First Love, Caprice, Sweet Dreams, Wildfire and Wishing Star will be joined this month by Windswept, a "contemporary gothic" series. If I were a 16-year-old, would I buy these books? Well, perhaps if I had limited financial and emotional resources, knew about rising unemployment among teen-agers and cutbacks in college loans and scholarships, had at least heard of liquor and drugs, felt uncertain about sex, had some awareness of divorce and the correlation between poverty (genteel or crude) and single women (with or sans children), and didn't want to think too much about any of this—yes, I would buy these books.

And if I were an adult writer, editor or publisher who knew all of this and had experienced some of it, and perhaps wanted to recreate my memory or fantasy of a carefree adolescence—a memory that would not only soothe and please me but would see to it that, for their own good, teen-age girls were no more prepared for the world than I had been and made no fewer mistakes than I had—well, I'd write, edit, advertise and sell these books. □

Kinships and Aginships

STANLEY CROUCH

THE TERRIBLE TWOS. *By Ishmael Reed. St. Martin's Press. 169 pp. $11.95.*

Ishmael Reed's obsessions center around the definitions of quality in American art and the literary politics that go into establishing one work as more valuable than another. At war with what he considers ethnic and academic provincialism, for the last ten years he has been using the term "multi-cultural art" to describe sources of artistic inspiration that lie outside European models. The only problem is that what Reed is talking about here is little more than an outdated spinoff of modernism. In fact, his position that the use of techniques and forms from so-called Third World esthetics is somehow revolutionary comes long after Picasso turned the art world on its ear by ringing his own changes on the inspiration provided by African masks; and in his experimentation with popular genres, Reed follows modern masters as diverse as James Joyce and Alain Robbe-Grillet.

But what *is* interesting about Reed is the tireless campaign he has waged against convention and orthodoxy within the worlds of black art and radical politics. He has long been opposed to the tar-brush racism of black nationalists and the pretentious communalism of ethnic nationalists; he has also been throwing Negro napalm—a mixture of syrup, potash and lye—at the barricades of simplistic feminism. In short, for all the problems and confusions of Reed's ideas, he has refused to submit either to ideologues or to the opportunists of the marketplace.

At the same time, however, Reed is prone to jump on other sorts of bandwagons. If he becomes angry at one writer, he will suddenly champion another he has previously denounced, especially if the latter assists him in the assault on the first. The literary magazines he helped bring into existence—*Yardbird*, *Y'Bird* and *Quilt*—have all reflected Reed's kinships and aginships. But they have also brought out a body of work that begins to suggest more the potential than the realization of America's immense cultural diversity—work by Negroes, Caucasians, Asians, Hispanics and Native Americans.

When Reed left New York for the West Coast in 1968, he initially promoted writers who were black but who were opposed to the agitprop howlings of LeRoi Jones and his imitators. After a few years, Frank Chin informed Reed that the entire Asian-American experience had been ignored by both the small and large press establishments. As a result, Reed began to seek out work by a wide range of ethnic writers. Hence the idea of multi-cultural art and the formation of a literary army which Reed hopes will grow until academic and publishing forces have to acknowledge its place in American literature, its definitions of the American experience.

To that end, Reed has developed a number of publishing ventures for other people's work; he has published novels, plays, poetry and fantasies, and seems to reserve the most uneven stuff for his periodicals and anthologies. He has championed this literature on speaking tours and on panels about little magazines. He recently said of it,

> What is new today is the use of avant-garde techniques for the expression of an ethnic point of view, taking what Europeans and white Americans have

Stanley Crouch is a staff writer for The Village Voice.

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> put out there and changing it the same ways jazz musicians changed Tin Pan Alley tunes to fit their experience and the world they knew about. So when people accuse ethnic writers of imitating white writers, they usually mean the techniques, not what's being said.

This observation is significant in its recognition that innovations can be redefined rather than ignored—a healthy corrective for what ailed almost all militant black writing in the nationalist days: its antiwhite rhetoric was asinine; its art, often out of ignorance, was a poor imitation of the Euro-American avant-garde.

Though none of the writers Reed has published have become successful through his efforts, his own penchant for satire and battle has earned him some devoted followers, the majority of whom swear most loudly by *Mumbo Jumbo*, his third novel and his most elaborate development of the themes that dominate the bulk of his fiction. His use of totemic characters in *Flight to Canada* led to the Tlingit Indians inviting him to Alaska, while his historical allusions inspired Leo Litwak to bring Reed to Los Angeles in 1981 to respond to papers on Frederick Douglass and Lester Young at a meeting of the American Historical Society. There, as in his recent book, *The Terrible Twos*, Reed opposes glamorizing street thugs and warns against demagogues, Marxists and the threat of "cultural imperialism." He describes monotheism as a metaphor for the kind of unilateral thought that dismisses Third World values and creativity, and he believes that combining the popular and the ancient is the key to contemporary vitality. In the wake of redneck racism he thinks he has discovered what Joseph Skvorecky once called "the censors of an entirely different dictatorship"; he identifies them as certain obnoxious black women and powerful white men who act in collusion. Reed lampoons this conspiracy—a relationship he believes has a history that stretches from the plantation to the hallowed halls of white-collar crime. He also sees it manifested in the world of publishing and criticism. "They accuse me of misogyny," he says, "but no one addresses the images and the monstrous actions of black males in the novels of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Toni Cade Bambara. I guess these white males and gullible feminists are too in love with their literary mammies to do that."

The trouble with *The Terrible Twos* is that he's said it all before and said it much better. This time out, he's picked another genre to tear apart with his imposition of varied forms and combinations of perspective. Just as he used *Antigone* in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* to create a brilliant satire that collapsed under the strain of its near-misogyny, and just as he used the western for *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, the detective story for *Mumbo Jumbo*, the slave narrative and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for *Flight to Canada*, Reed weaves Rastafarianism and a reverse of the Todd Clifton dummy sequence from *Invisible Man* together with Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* in *The Terrible Twos*. Again we get the self-obsessed harpies, the mission Indians, the black hero who takes over the white form (unlike Todd Clifton, Black Peter is not controlled by whites who speak through his mouth—he speaks through theirs), the dumb black street hustlers who get into a game too complicated for them to understand, the corruption of Christianity, the secret society of powerful white bosses, the argument that preliterate custom and belief are just as good as modern civilization (if not better) and the beleaguered black hero who has woman problems (Reed touches on the sexual provincialism of black women, which didn't begin to change until the late 1960s when they had to compete with liberated and liberal white women for the affections of black men, but he doesn't do anything with that proverbial hot potato).

I'm not saying that Reed should abandon his concerns, but I am saying that for all the literary appropriations in *The Terrible Twos*, it hasn't the level of invention that made his best work succeed. There is too much predictability, too much dependence on revelation through conversation and interior monologue. Most of the mysteries must be explained by the characters, and what we do discover through their narratives isn't very interesting. When the President, for instance, is taken into hell, what he sees are the ghosts of presidents and vice presidents past, and there follow heavy-handed scenes of contrition and retribution—Truman grieving over the atom bomb, Rockefeller chained to the corpses of the Attica victims, etc. When Santa Claus and

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Hannah Arendt
For Love of the World

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl

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Yale University Press
New Haven and London

Drawing by David Schorr

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the President get their chance to speak out against the commercialization of Christmas on the one hand and the manipulation of the country by industrialists on the other, the clichés resound. But since Reed considers this novel a surrealist variation on the social realist novel of economic complaint, maybe he thought he should pop the corn rather than serve it in hard kernels. There are some funny passages along the way, however. There is even an attempt to infuse his surreal puppet show with realistic relationships, especially on an erotic level, and this brings what freshness there is to the novel. It also suggests that Reed may soon examine the range of sexual and social attractions that a multiracial society makes so possible, especially since the passage from Europe to the Third World can sometimes take place within only a few city blocks. If that is what he intends for his sequels—*The Terrible Threes* and *The Terrible Fours*—then the world he has developed, one quilted with endless allusions, mythology, improvisation and concentric circles of time and culture, could give birth to the potential so basic to the social contract and to the diversity of this country—Ishmael Reed's All-American Novel. *The Terrible Twos*, unfortunately, is mostly a shadow of his former work, and a shadow that tells us little we don't already know. □

Between Poem and Reader

CALVIN BEDIENT

I'm not one of those pessimists, their ancient standards ten feet tall, who groan over the poetic inchlings of the age. I count my blessings—Louise Glück, James Merrill, Robert Penn Warren, Charles Wright, John Ashbery, among others—and keep content. Yet I know that "the situation of poetry," like the "lady of situations" in Eliot's masterpiece, is not all it ought to be, and when I look for someone to blame I find everyone.

To begin with the poets themselves: even of those who reach volume-glory, most are bad. It was the same, of course, in earlier ages, but time has kindly sloughed off the former bad while piling up around us the present bad. The art is cruel: to attempt it requires astonishing innocence, astonishing confidence or astonishing courage. To be good, it must be very, very good, else it might as well be horrid.

Yet the writing of it must always be encouraged, for windfalls, for worked wonders. Perhaps poetry really is (there are moments when one has doubts) one of the most important of human activities. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche proposed that all communication begins in duress: as an endangered animal, man needed his peers, "he had to learn to express his distress and to make himself understood." Consciousness, Nietzsche added, is the blossom of this need to communicate. Man had to "know" himself in order to make the right appeals. Even so, herd communication neglects our "altogether incomparably personal, unique, and infinitely individual" beings. Here arises the importance of poetry. It began as herd rhythm but has been refined to different pulses. It frees language from distress. It delineates the consciousness not tied to immediate needs.

You know that you're "incomparably personal, unique, and infinitely individual," and your poetry should show it—so it was meant. But between your vast interior and the tiny page often falls a shadow that, as the author, you'll be the last to see. The shadow is compounded usually of inexperience, imitativeness and softness toward language and all those incomparably personal feelings. Few can keep the shadow away (no matter: to write at all is to enjoin the reverence as well as the arrogance of creativity), and the critic's task is to bring the few inexplicably severe ones, the harsh-as-sealight ones, to public notice. The public's task is to notice.

First must appear, however, the middle person: the editor, a kind of critic, too. And editors are thanklessly limited to what's available—the poems for their sometimes token inclusion of poetry, the volumes that reach their desks and the reviewers. Bound, further, by the publishers and the public, who feel that poetry isn't really of the first impor-

Calvin Bedient is the author of Eight Contemporary Poets *(Oxford) and is currently writing a book on the poetry of Robert Penn Warren. He teaches at the University of California at Los Angeles.*

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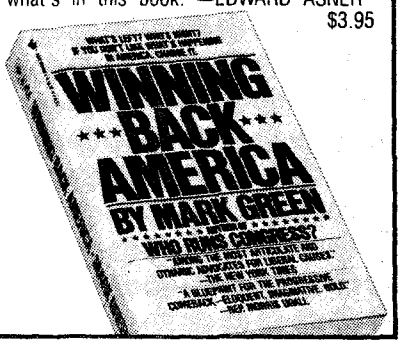

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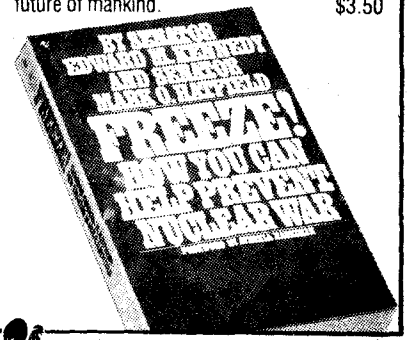

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tance—too far from herd need and distress. With more than one commissioned article on poetry to carry in any one season, an editor is likely to start shouting "Deluge!" Fair volumes go down the drain.

One of the pleasures in a busy life is to open a magazine and find a new poem by, say, Philip Levine or Dave Smith and, fighting back the day's fatigue, get down to discovery. You may go away balked (no one's perfect) or you may resolve to come back to the beehive when you're a better gatherer, but the gamble is part of the game.

As for poetry reviews, who besides the reviewer and his or her spouse and the occasional poet blessed by a gold star stuck to his forehead ever completely likes them? Most reviewers seem to be struggling to pick up a diamond chip or a nasty, spidery speck with a boxing glove stuffed with their impatience, indifference, ambition, biases regarding certain styles and stances toward reality, or, not least likely, their feeling that the volume under inspection ought to be more like the one they're writing themselves or the one they could write if only . . . Or the glove might be padded with friendship or literary politics, the punch pulled.

You long for straight talk and trenchancy. More generosity here and, over here, some guts. Here less haste. There more style. Now and then a reviewer stands out (you know you'll get something from, say, Robert Pinsky or Michael Wood), but the stars are few, the night wide, and Helen Vendler can be cajoled to appear only so many times a season.

You wonder, How about more regular columnists? But the right combination of tact and toughness, knowledge and lightness, is rare. Besides, critics who really love a volume want to write tomes and tomes about it. True writing is discovery, infinitely engrossed. Short reviews flash; you seek the full daylight of understanding.

Beyond the reviewers there are the academic critics, often the same only enlarged like puff-fish. They show some of the same defects and some new ones, not least a grinding industrial tone and self-important methodologies, both signaling an incapacity for experience. Grim ambition is the villain. Still, exceptions arise. A whip-minded Elizabeth Schneider, a spirited humanist like Terrence Des Pres or a sinuous and sinewy Richard Poirier jog the rule.

Last, the public, or rather, the rest of it, and here we find people who are "poets" themselves (and if you think you are, you are), English majors and former English majors, and the unexpected butcher, baker or candlestick maker whose *love* of poetry is often keener than the professors'. Not a deplorable audience, really, for good reading requires linguistic competency, an "ear" and a habituation to the jaunty and ethereal life of figures, that life to poets so natural but to many others a puzzle.

The modern (and American) "tradition of the new" has forced on poetry an evolution of "difference" that spawns obscurity. Plainness still appears (as sometimes in Glück), but it's usually invisibly laced with subtleties. If you don't start at the bottom of the trail (and few but English majors do), you're not likely to get to the top. You'll open John Ashbery and you won't be anywhere. You have to put in some time.

Poetry, again, explores the depths under the rushing or grazing herd and brings back word of our neighbors and ourselves. There are dozens of reasons for reading it, few of them bad. One is for imaginary scenes and lives—other scenes, other lives. It's like a holiday, only richer. Another is for the delectation of verbal know-how, which is sometimes genius. But read it for lies of ennoblement, to overhear confession, to magpie tricks of the trade, whatever, and a little of it and of you will likely come alive.

On my office door a pertinent sign is

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John A. Williams

A NOVEL

Author of *The Man Who Cried I Am* and *The Junior Bachelor Society*

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pasted that I didn't know was a bumper sticker till someone pointed it out. In Los Angeles, herd animals that we are, filing one after the other down the freeways, we're known for communicating via license plates and bumper stickers, so as this article turns its respectful tail to you, kindly note:

good
READ A POEM TODAY. □

Letters to the Young

KURT VONNEGUT

ECOTOPIA. *By Ernest Callenbach. Banyan Tree Books. 167 pp. $4.95.*

ECOTOPIA EMERGING. *By Ernest Callenbach. Banyan Tree Books. 326 pp. $7.95.*

Ernest Callenbach has an M.A. in English from the University of Chicago, and is editor of *Film Quarterly* and an editor for the University of California Press—but he could not find a publisher for his first novel, *Ecotopia*. So he published it himself. That was back in 1975, when he was 45 years old. I mention his age because so many of his enthusiasms are popularly associated with a younger generation.

Ecotopia is about an American male journalist's travels in a new nation whose citizens waste nothing, poison nothing, work only twenty hours a week, wear patched blue jeans, smoke marijuana and run their machinery with energy from the sun, the wind, the sea and the products of fermentation. They are organic farmers. They hate automobiles and nuclear power plants. They love bicycles and mass transportation.

Ecotopia could easily have been funny. It is serious instead. We are meant to admire the Ecotopians, and to be inspired to live as they do.

Callenbach, to whom I have spoken on the telephone, is aware that the book is a lot more successful as a conservationist tract than as a novel. The plot is feeble. The journalist is prepared to find all sorts of things wrong with the new nation. But there is nothing wrong with it, and he falls in love with an Ecotopian woman, and he becomes a citizen.

Still, Callenbach managed to sell 40,000 copies of *Ecotopia*, without advertising and without its being reviewed in any major literary journal—and then Bantam brought out a new edition and sold 145,000 more. So he has had a nice little success, which he surely deserves. *Ecotopia* is an admirable inducer of daydreams about what life might be like if we stopped wrecking the planet and started adoring it.

But Callenbach was no more satisfied with the book as fiction than his readers were, so he wrote *Ecotopia Emerging*, which is about the birth pangs of the new nation. Again, he had to publish it himself. He brought it out in 1981, when he was 51, and has sold 3,000 copies so far. We meet the same windmills and solar cells and wood-burning stoves and high-speed railways and so on that we got to know in *Ecotopia*. But the citizens are in an uproar this time. They are trying to secede from the United States of America. They want to take Washington and Oregon with them, and the northern half of California, including San Francisco. So they have a fight on their hands.

But they win.

They claim to have hidden atomic bombs around what is left of the United States, which they call "the old country." They promise to set the bombs off if they are attacked. Also: "the old country" is militarily engaged elsewhere, defending oil fields overseas.

During our telephone conversation, Callenbach proved to be engagingly critical of his own writings. He felt, as I do, that he was probably mistaken to have allowed his idealists to grab off such desirable real estate, leaving the rest of us stuck with their share of the national debt, and practically all the old people and poor people, and the Love Canal, and so on.

"They shouldn't have taken San Francisco," I said. "That was just too greedy. As far as I am concerned, that was the straw that broke the camel's back."

He thought I was right, but he asked me to imagine the book he would have had to write if he had situated his Sierra Club utopia on the shores of Lake Erie, say. Such a book would have been the size of James Clavell's *Noble House*, since the cleanup of the city of Niagara Falls alone would have covered a period of a thousand years or more.

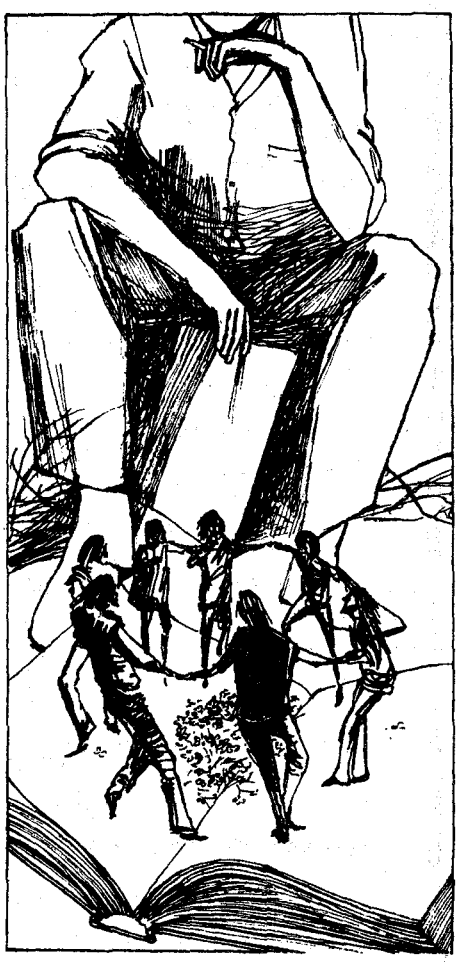
Also—although Callenbach did not say so, there would have been a lot of old people in that story, and both of his novels, more than anything else, are love letters from a middle-aged man to the innocently conceited, undisillusioned young. Everybody of any importance in his utopia is under 30 years old.

Imagine a place like that.

Here are the rules for good living that the childish leaders of his brave new world lay down, and they turn out to be the same rules agreed upon by my own children—before they themselves began to enter middle age: "No extinction of other species. No nuclear weapons or nuclear plants. No manufacturing of carcinogenic or mutagenic substances. No adulterants in foods. No discrimination by reason of sex, race, age, religion, or ethnic origin. No private cars. No limited liability corporations. No growth in population."

These good rules are called "The Nine No-nos."

And the prevailing winds bring nothing but fresh air from the Pacific to Ecotopia, and they carry the wood smoke and marijuana fumes away. □



Kurt Vonnegut's new novel, Dead Eye Dick, *will be published by Dell in October.*

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PRIZE-WINNING POETS - 1982

The winners of "Discovery—THE NATION, '82" are Wendy Battin, Jennifer Crewe, William Olsen and Bruce Smith. They will read their poems on Monday, May 24, at 8 P.M. at The Poetry Center, 92nd Street YM-YWHA in New York City. The contest was judged by Galway Kinnell, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge and Paul Zweig. Now in its eighth year, the competition represents a fusion of The Poetry Center's "Discovery" contest and The Nation*'s Poetry Prize. It is designed to attract larger audiences for new poets by combining publication and recital.*

The contest was open to poets who have not been published in book form. The winners were chosen on the basis of a body of work rather than on individual poems.

—Grace Schulman, Poetry Editor

BILLY GOAT & THE TREE OF LIFE

after a statue found at Ur

What the Chaldeans saw
that set their hammers
against the original
gold is behind us.
A goat we assume is a god,
because he stands on two legs,
as we do, towers like a tree
against a tree. His forked trunk
grows as we do,
out of two roots. But the tree
rises as only itself
from the ground.
And so we have composition,
the tripod
on which a lens can be mounted
to stabilize vision.
God the goat raises
his hooves in the branches. The tree
branches, and branches, as far as
the valence of metal allows.

They saw this perhaps
watching the goats
that went among them on
four legs, even in the city—
the city, their latest idea,
like an upstanding
goat, that stumbled
forward on barter and
language, always out of step.
The weight passed from my
hand to yours might have been
a word that you'd carry
the length of the clay-banked channels
we would call streets,
while the goats
wandered everywhere, feeding
on everything, asking
what nothing was worth.

Wendy Battin

SILVER AND INFORMATION

An obituary has more news than this day,
brilliant, acid yellow and silver
off the water at land's end. The disparate
prismatic things blind you as they fin
their way across the surface of the water.
This light cannot inform you of your dying.

Fish of lustrous nothing, fish of desire,
fish whose push and syllable
can make things happen,
fish whose ecstatic hunger
is no longer news, and fish whose mouth
makes zeros of the multitudes,
the hosts who wait for their analogies
and something nice to eat, the billions
the waves commemorate in their breaking
down to their knees on the shore,
their cloacal sound. Now,
I'm no longer singular,
no longer dying, I've split
and split like the smallest animal
in the ocean until I'm famous
in my hunger and anonymous,
so that naming one
is like naming one runnel,
the sea, or one drop of blood,
the intoxicating passion.

I keep the multitudes in mind
when I hear daily that one has murdered
another. A news more silver
than given, more light
than anything captured.
And I hold them all in mind—
the fulgence, the data, and the death—
or else I lose it,
that package of slippery fish,
that don't die exactly but smell
in a heaven so low we can hear
the moans and feel the circles
and bite in each cell.

Bruce Smith

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PUBLIC GARDENS

As if all day the Milky Way came down
to shrub-rows and hillocks of raked weeds, we study

the fog to exercise our part in it.
The largeness that's everywhere is us

nowhere we stand, and when fog lifts
no romantic stars or starlets are coupling

in that empty copse, love. We
stand there and watch how pretty the nothing is,

and our shadows cross the husk of a watch
stuck at 2:30. Each moment dies twice,

once for itself, once for the love of it,
once in moonlight, once so the sun can shine

over who- or whatever lived out their flaws
to slower perfections. We stand and talk

so our shadows can pretend to stand and talk.
Could they ever want to hear how briefly

orange blossoms settled when a whirlwind collapsed?
Could the flatness of their grounded gestures

inhabit the roses named by dying dowagers—
Snow Over Chicago, *Storybook*,

Sunrise Sunset, *Babbling Brook* and *Vanity*—
names that gloss over a dying plot.

A square in the past. A handkerchief blowing
through night's lunar silences,

embroidered with twigs, pollen and birds
whose empty bones must give them horrible dreams.

There's more hollowness. *Heavenly Bamboo*
from China and Japan, lovingly shaded

by the *Marsh Grapefruit*, West Indies.
We're demure sometimes in places like this

because they're everything we can't express.
As if those boughs were the hands of a lover,

two lovers, many lovers, all their branching hands
in moonlight playing over flesh.

Because our own gnawing is that diffuse,
it took the plants of every continent,

spring and autumn dancing hand in hand,
to compose paradise, when it scattered

with the mistake and some bad weather.
It comes back sometimes, a

moment when a breeze in autumn
seems spring-like, or when a hinge squeaks

with a thin sound, like winter,
behind everything. But just one moment

he wanted her to leave his side,
leave behind their bower for sleep

and anything that brought them closer,
just try to bear what little would be left.

William Olsen

OPENING THE MATRIOSHKA DOLL

This is the best gift—a hollow doll
with no arms, carved out of pine wood.
It looks as though it can be twisted open
at the waist, dividing the dress's pattern
of green-yellow leaves and purple flowers.
Its round face stares with overlarge eyes.

As small hands force it apart, the eyes
remain steady, and a second doll
stands solemn inside. The flowers
on this one's dress are smaller. The wood
shines bright pink in its new pattern.
A small girl knows that this, too, will open.

Discarding each half, she quickly pries open
to reach her own new age, number eight, and eyes
each different painted apron's pattern
for the line that shows it will break. A doll
the size of this fourth one would
be happy with two plain yellow flowers.

They're just like the spring flowers
the girl found in the field, tiny and open
to the sun . . . she learned once they would
wither if brought inside. "Use your eyes,
not your hands," her mother said. A sixth doll
comes alive, then pulls apart. The pattern

is simple. She wonders if this pattern
will end, as in winter, when the flowers
close up for good. Noticing the doll,
her mother comes to stand in the open
doorway. Five pairs of black eyes
stare up from the floor's polished wood.

"Pick those up. Don't scratch the wood,"
her mother said. "It's a pattern
with you; they'll lie right in front of your eyes
for days. I'm going outside to weed the flowers
now. You need to get out in the open
too—why don't you put away that doll?"

But here is a tiny wood peg—too small for flowers—
the pattern is finished, or begun. No one could open
this, the best in her eyes, the last doll.

Jennifer Crewe

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HOW TO SAVE YOUR LIFE AND THE ONE NEXT TO YOU

OVERCOMING YOUR PSYCHOLOGICAL RESISTANCE TO SEAT BELTS MAY BE THE KEY.

The facts are startling. Experts estimate that almost half of all automobile occupant fatalities and many serious injuries might have been avoided if the people had been wearing seat belts. That's because most injuries occur when the car stops abruptly and the occupants are thrown against the car's interior or out of the car. Belts reduce this risk.

Many people say they know the facts, but they still don't wear belts. Their reasons range all over the lot: seat belts are troublesome to put on, they are uncomfortable, or they wrinkle your clothes. Some people even think getting hurt or killed in a car accident is a question of fate; and, therefore, seat belts don't matter.

If you're one of those people who don't use belts for one reason or another, please think carefully about your motivations. Are your objections to seat belts based on the facts or on rationalizations?

Here are a few of the common rationalizations. Many people say they are afraid of being trapped in a car by a seat belt. In fact, in the vast majority of cases, seat belts protect passengers from severe injuries, allowing them to escape more quickly. Another popular rationalization: you'll be saved by being thrown clear of the car. Here again, accident data have proved that to be untrue—you are almost always safer inside the car.

Some people use seat belts for highway driving, but rationalize it's not worth the trouble to buckle up for short trips. The numbers tell a different story: 80% of all automobile accidents causing serious injury or death involve cars traveling under 40 miles per hour. And three quarters of all collisions happen less than 25 miles from the driver's home.

When you're the driver, you have the psychological authority to convince all of the passengers that they should wear seat belts. It has been shown that in a car, the driver is considered to be an authority figure. A simple reminder from you may help save someone's life.

Another common myth: holding a small child in your arms will provide the child with sufficient protection during a crash. The safety experts disagree. They point out that even during a 30 mph collision, a 10-pound child can exert a 300-pound force against the parent's grip. So please make sure Child Restraint Systems are used for children who aren't old enough to use regular seat belts.

If you're an employer, encourage your employees to wear seat belts. At GM, we've made it a matter of policy that everyone riding in company-owned vehicles is expected to wear lap and shoulder belts.

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Paperback Counterrevolution

ALICE K. TURNER

To realize that you have been living through a Golden Age which appears to have come to an end is to feel like a dinosaur contemplating the end of the Cretaceous period. Life has been sweet, you say, what's all this about a glacier? But you never say that until the glacier is actually at the door of the cave.

Anyone who went to college or embarked upon a course of self-education between the mid-1950s and the beginning of the 1980s lived in a kind of Golden Age of reading which, it seems from this newly frosty perspective, was unique. The Ice Age, brought on by inflation, hard times and a swing to cautiousness and conservatism among young people and the institutions that teach them, has arrived.

Here is a brief history of the period: In the universities before the Golden Age, there was the textbook—usually an anthology of chapters from standard works, essays and syntheses by textbook specialists, few of whom boasted felicity of style or originality of thought, no matter how well they knew their subjects. In addition, literature majors could find some of "the classics" in paperback or in the Modern Library. In most other disciplines, students had to sign up at the reference or reserve room of the library to be granted access to original source material.

Then, beginning in 1953, paperback houses such as Anchor and Vintage began to change all that. They sought a specific audience—academic, literary, highbrow—and they combed the bushes for books to tempt it. They found lots of books there, books that upperclassmen, graduate students and others with special interests really needed—or found that they needed once the books appeared in those perky little editions that crowd the shelves of so many of us with casual interests and limited purses.

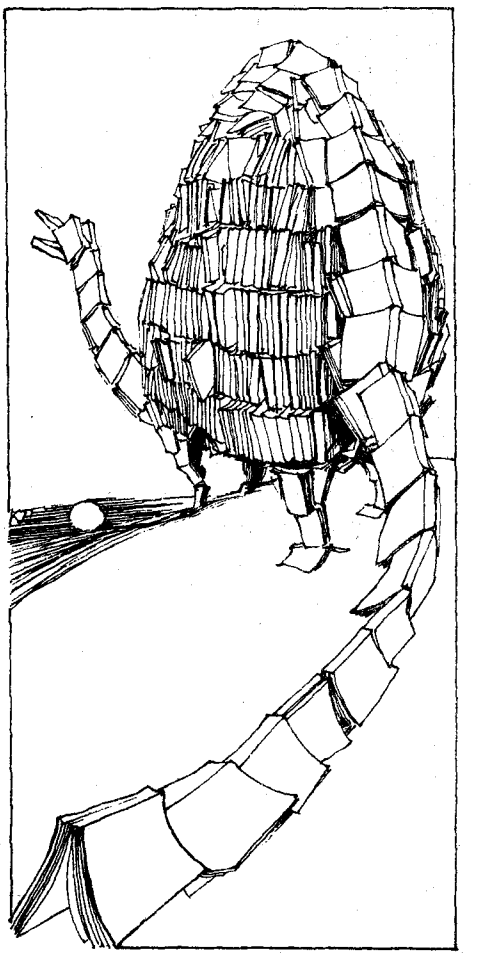
Fed by this rich and random harvest, school curriculums changed radically in the 1960s, when virtually everything found its way into paperback. Pushed to the wall by demanding students and fiery assistant professors, the most venerable universities relaxed their core requirements to embrace new courses ranging from the solid to the inspired to the demented. These courses often grew out of the available paperbacks in the field, and they changed as new ones appeared. New disciplines emerged and were crossed with one another. At its best, it was challenging and fruitful. At its worst, undisciplined and faddish—in other words, just begging for a poke in the nose.

In the 1970s, several things happened. First, the costs of practically everything connected with book manufacture and sales (especially the cost of paper) began to rise alarmingly, and cover prices, especially on books with limited audiences, shot up too. Second, the enormous diversity of new courses, many of which were taught for only one semester, made it very hard for publishers to predict sales and to keep books in print. Third, the paperback bandwagon got too crowded—university presses began putting out their own paperbacks, and the mass-market houses jumped in too. For instance, in 1973, Bantam Books organized its entire list and backlist—a not noticeably intellectual collection which that year leaned heavily on *The Exorcist* and two books by Erich von Däniken—into more than thirty categories ranging from "Contemporary Poetry" to "Self-Identity," drew up study guides for each, and set about peddling these as "mini-courses" to schools. They were fairly successful at first, but their operation could also be construed as asking for a poke in the nose.

In the 1980s, universities have become more conservative; they have moved back to core curriculums and have eliminated the unusual or adventurous courses which, in any case, students no longer sign up for. Teachers have moved back to standard texts or anthologies of some sort. Students, too, have become remarkably more conservative, using the universities for the narrowest of purposes: careerism.

And, finally, even those professors who want to assign books with the same generous abandon as they did five years ago find two problems: enormous numbers of books have been dropped from the backlists, and those remaining cost more than students can afford. "It came home to me this semester," says Michael Zuckerman, who teaches history at the University of Pennsylvania, "because last semester I was living in something of a dream world. I taught a course on the 1960s, and I assigned a lot of drugstore books that you can still get for between $1.50 and $2.95—in the back of my mind that's still what a paperback costs. But this spring I wanted to teach a course on work and careers in the first half of the nineteenth century. And as I sat down to draw up a book list for the college store, I realized that the cheapest book on my list was $5.95 and most were between $10.95 and $12.95—I was asking my students to pay between $100 and $150 per course on top of tuition."

Zuckerman apologized to the class and suggested a pool of books, but he did not change his curriculum. "I went to school in the 1950s and studied mostly from textbooks," he explains. "But by the time I got to grad school, the paperback revolution had begun, and it was clear to me immediately that this was an infinitely better way of teaching and learning. I've never used a textbook in my entire teaching career. Textbooks are mostly silly, aimed at the level of a relatively timid junior college teacher.



Alice K. Turner is Playboy*'s fiction editor.*

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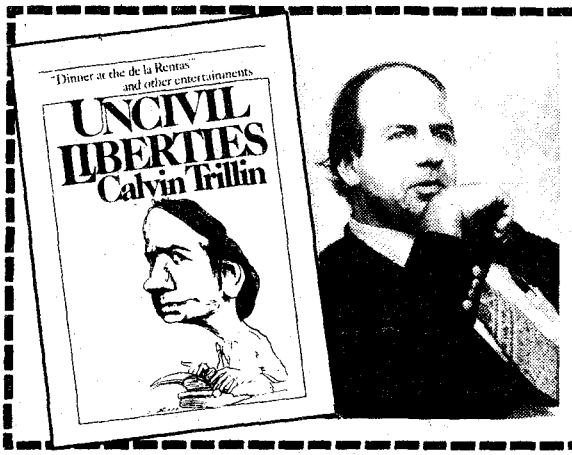

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And, especially in history, you want your students to be familiar with original sources. But I will have to think about textbooks because I can't impose the burden of these costs on students. It will be an enormous step backward—the worst of it is that we will lose that interaction in the classroom where the best students plow through the books looking for arguments to throw back in your face. You can't fairly expect them to burrow into the library just to fight you, which is, of course, what you want them to do."

When teachers retreat to textbooks and the demand for paperbacks dwindles, books disappear from publishers' lists. "The pool of books from which I can choose has become far, far more restricted in the past few years," says Roger Sale, professor of English at the University of Washington. And this is generally true in all the humanities.

The worst consequence of this vicious cycle is that young people are not acquiring the habit of buying books and building a personal library. Because of cost and the new conservatism (not to mention the single-minded work that goes into a pre-law or MBA degree), the books that their teachers press upon them will be only the most basic ones, and the odds are against their buying for self-education or curiosity. The future looks bad for that part of the paperback business that does not depend on the Three C's—cats, cubes and cooking (computers make a fourth at the moment).

This isn't a prediction of gloom and doom. The glacier is already here. It's happening. Even those first paperbacks that became instant classics simply because of their availability are out of print now, sad news for those of us for whom a cover design by Edward Gorey or Leonard Baskin evokes a happy moment in the acquiring of an education.

So what is the text-resistant teacher to do? Well, there's always the Xerox machine. Teachers tend to be law-abiding folk, and many of them are writers too—but they have their limits. Virtually every one of them does a certain amount of photocopying, compiling, in effect, pirated anthologies of their own to hand out to students. "Good old American technology," says François Camoin, a writer and English professor at the University of Utah. "We all do it and we all feel guilty about it. I wish there were a way we could pay writers a royalty on what we

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use, but at this point just the bookkeeping involved would make it impossible. The paperback thing, in the form that we had it, seems to be over, and we don't know what will come next. Meanwhile you can't avoid the Xerox."

That's hard on the book business, too, as well as on writers. And it is indeed hard to know what the next stage will be.

We come from an affluence we hardly knew we had. We had an abundance of wonderful books sold cheaply and discussed eagerly in the universities, bringing a cross-fertilization of ideas and a willingness to experiment adventurously which now seems downright magical. It was a rare and privileged moment, and we thought it would last forever. We may see new marvels as education enters the computer age, marvels which may make us look back on this as truly an age of dinosaurs, but we'll never see that again. □

What Reading Public?

ELISABETH SIFTON

Many decades ago, when the book business was a simpler, less competitive affair, writers delivered manuscripts to publishers, who chose the ones they wanted to issue, published them with dispatch and then looked around for more. The matter of seeing manuscripts into bound-book form and selling them was fairly straightforward, and so were the profits. Within each firm, labor was divided among employees whose competence was finance, production or sales, and then there was one person who was a specialist in books per se, a "reader." This mysterious figure was often a writer, too, a man or woman of letters who knew about books, was shrewd about writers and enthusiastic about literature. The "readers" began to work with the authors and were drawn into helping the publishers make the basic decision: how much money to spend on what kind of book. Thus the emergence of the editor: a convenient and practical link between reader and writer.

The book business has now become a tremendously complex and low-profit affair, but it is still a collaborative effort in which the editor's view is only one among many—although in most well-run houses it continues to be decisive. Obviously editors must be able to persuade their colleagues about the worth of the books they recommend, for they depend on the others to help finance, design, price, sell and advertise them. This seems plausible enough: how will you ever attract readers to a book if you can't even induce your colleagues to see its point?

Yet we have been hearing a great noise about the newly crass and ruthless tendencies in publishing that make it harder and harder to issue good books—good fiction especially. About the way the marketing and money people have taken over and thwarted the literary sensibilities that once controlled book companies. About editors being stifled. This is mostly nonsense, I believe, but a grain of truth clings here and there to the caricature.

One feature of the caricature is the notion that editors now have an automatic hostility to original and innovative work because they consider it "unprofitable." But in my experience (a medium-sized company sees a thousand or more works of fiction a year and picks thirty or forty to publish, of which perhaps four to eight are first novels or collections of short stories), we editors see very little indeed that strikes us as even remotely original, and those books are precisely the ones we'd like to believe might not lose money. How are we so sure, asks the skeptic, and what are our criteria? We're pretty sure. The unpalatable truth is that most of the novels sent to us are no good. Our culture seems to encourage any sentient person to believe he or she can write a novel, and a frightening number of unqualified people call themselves writers—people with no knowledge of the technical requirements of literature, people with nothing to say, people with no life or spirit.

A large category of submissions consists of better material—"kind of talented, good of its kind, not bad, quite well done, rather appealing," we say. Here our criteria are various, chancy and changing, nor do we apologize about this. We don't use the formal

Elisabeth Sifton is editor in chief of The Viking Press. Her essay is based on remarks she gave for the M.I.T. writing program last fall.

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critical vocabulary much—either out of ignorance or because it seems inapplicable. And we value our lack of critical expertise because we feel it serves the eventual readers of the books we publish. The grammar of formal criticism organizes the language of published literature; it accepts that certain books exist and others don't. But we editors work in a shadow territory where it is not at all clear which books exist and which don't. Not merely in the sense of which are published but which are in fact written. Not merely which are written but which will exist in the author's mind. The fashionable critical idea that the text is a body of signs whose meaning the reader must supply, or the notion that the text is an agglomeration of meanings whose intention it was not within the author's power to determine—these are, to us, almost laughably familiar daily problems. A writer's intention or lack of intention to control both the meaning of his or her text and the diverse readings that people will contribute to it is the stuff of our daily work.

But most of the novels we see are mad, bad, banal, derivative or imitative—and apparently purposeless. This last drawback is the most worrisome: worse than clumsy prose, unmotivated characters, overwritten situations and incidents, and agonizingly predictable themes. "There are certain books in a tradition which, after a while, everyone stops reading but no one can stop writing," Leslie Fiedler wrote. "The less aware a novelist is of the earlier books, the more he is likely to submit to their pattern; and this is one of the best reasons for insisting that writers be educated." So while there may be talent—a pretty way with idiom, a mastery of issues, an innovative twist with dialogue, a sensitively perceived set of characters, a shrewd finger on the pulse of public enthusiasm—it won't add up, it doesn't have a raison d'être. Editors often feel, like Fiedler, that writers haven't been reading enough, have ceased to live in the real world of books, and they will gloomily suspect that the novel in question can't live in the real world of books either.

Now the fashionable doctrine puts it the other way around. In a risky, unsupportive financial environment, it is said, publishers prefer to put their money on obvious winners—on proven commodities that appeal to a large, indiscriminate readership—thus guaranteeing not only earnings to match the gigantic sums paid to acquire the books in the first place but big profits as well. As a result, the argument goes, the money available for less popular but more authentic works of the imagination, for the difficult or challenging or unconventional work—for novels, for what is novel, in short—has evaporated, and with it the public for what is best and newest in our country's literature.

It *is* true that publishers sometimes spend obscenely large sums of money on claptrap novels of no literary merit and, indeed, no redeeming social value. And it would appear that these sums are increasing at the expense of money for serious literature. This is a deplorable, but incontrovertible, danger, and one to which many publishers contribute. But what else is involved here besides the publishers' sins? Far deeper and more significant issues than the anguished yelps of the Authors Guild might lead one to believe. Issues that are created and determined not by publishers but by readers and writers, issues that affect the novel especially, above all other genres.

(One factor in the situation, by the way, is the immense negotiating power and financial independence of quite a few writers, novelists among them, whose agents move them around from one publishing firm to another in search of larger and larger commitments of speculative monies. This sets up a giddily competitive mood that rattles nerves all around, and writers, scholars, undercapitalized publishers or simply devoted editors in small firms that cannot or do not wish to compete in these leagues respond with confusion, resentment and envy. Still, we should applaud the fact that at least some writers are paid decently or even generously, considering how often in history this has not been the case.)

What reading public inhabits the environment in which books are published? Today, it's a very, *very* small public, and it's getting smaller all the time. The American people are not reading serious books the way they used to, and especially they are not reading novels. This is but a single, telling symptom of the crisis of literacy in our time, but it is one that unites the concerns of editors with those of sales managers, marketing directors and the people who hold the purse strings. Here we publishers are as one. What if there is no public? What if the publishers' job now must also extend to creating, nurturing and giving artificial life support to the primary activity of reading?

Consider the implications of the well-known arithmetic that tells us that, with luck, the average first novel sells only about 2,000 to 4,000 copies. This readership represents about .001 or .002 percent of the population. Even if a book becomes a best seller and reaches between 60,000 and 600,000 readers, we are still talking about only a minute proportion of the population. Not until a book has become a super best seller, like James Michener's *Covenant*, say, or has been enshrined as a Classic by teachers who assign it as a standard text, or has been sold to several million paperback readers—and that is only the *very* rare book—does it even begin to attract a modest segment of the audience for a television program that rates low on the Nielsen scale. Which is to say that even best sellers are barely on the charts in the economic world of mass-media America to which book publishers are erroneously, but often, assigned.

The tiny readership for good books has remained fairly constant for many decades, even as our population grows and, with it, the number of first novels published. Bennett Cerf said forty years ago that selling 8,000 copies of a book should make any publisher proud, selling 80,000 was cause for celebration in the streets, and selling 800,000 was a positive miracle. That was true 140 years ago, too, and it's about the same now. There is a natural limit on the readership for serious fiction, poetry and nonfiction in America that ranges, I would say, between 500 and 5,000

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people—roughly a hundred times the number of the publisher's and the author's immediate friends (Sifton's Law).

Interestingly, these statistics apply to other countries as well. When a Swedish publisher tells an Italian or Brazilian or American publisher that he hasn't done as well as he had hoped with so-and-so's first book, he means just about what the other three would mean: he means he sold only a few thousand copies. But *he* sold his few thousand in a country of just a few million people, and America is a land of 220 million souls. The American publisher would have to sell 50,000 copies to reach the same pitiable proportion of the population reached routinely by his Swedish colleague. But even in Europe the decline in readership since the high point reached a quarter-century ago has been precipitous. Distinguished literary houses have halved their print runs on first novels, restricted the amount of fiction on their lists and started to publish the big commercial books they once shunned.

But what of this country? What *about* the readership here? There is no doubt that in the past decades it has been declining and that the general culture is thinning out. Literacy as a phenomenon of growth and modernization is a thing of the past. Until recently, this was a country of readers: people of all trades and professions and habits of mind read books. Now only students read, and that rarely, just as they are only barely made to write. Teachers, of course, don't read at all. You can tell that from the way they boast that they're too busy to, and when they commit a book to paper themselves, it is likely to be unreadable. Lastly, the actual teaching shows they have little interest in encouraging students to be competent in, much less enthusiastic about, their language, their literature and their minds. Our college salespeople regularly report on the declining enrollment in courses about modern American fiction. We hear of professors of women's fiction who haven't read Iris Murdoch, Maureen Howard, Shirley Hazzard, Nadine Gordimer, Alice Adams, Anne Tyler or Muriel Spark—much less newer writers. And few literature courses celebrate novels as creations that might still be alive and worth reckoning with: on the contrary, the critics freeze-dry literature—reductive is not a sufficient word to describe their efforts.

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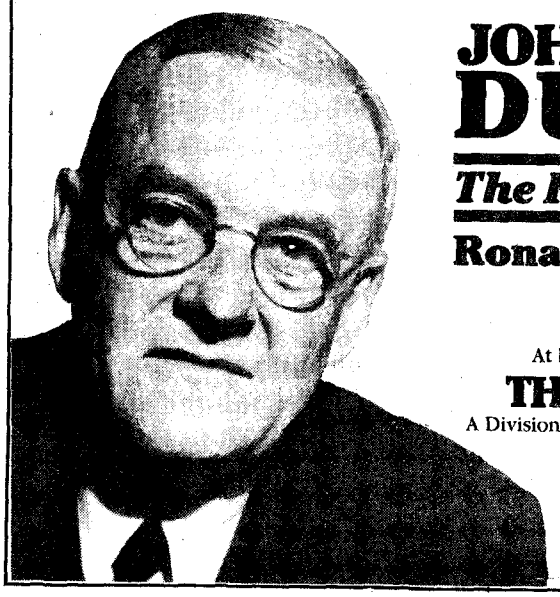

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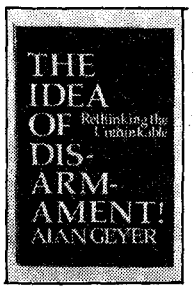

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But reading is not encouraged at any level of our educational system. Grammar school students are made neither to read nor to write. SAT scores continue to drop. How many of *us* have a passing acquaintance, let alone a loving friendship, with at least five books of the Bible? Half of *Paradise Lost*? Five plays of Shakespeare? With at least two books of Stendhal, Austen, Goethe, Proust, Thoreau? Or Frank Norris, Sinclair Lewis, Kate Chopin, Philip Roth or Walker Percy? Well, then, we should be dismayed, but not surprised, to discover how little is being read of what our newest writers are composing.

Any publisher can give dozens of statistics to legitimate his despair. A colleague who helped edit the final issue of *New World Writing* tells me that 2,600 manuscripts of short fiction were submitted—yet the issue sold only 2,400 copies. Routinely, publishers advance new novels into the stores in quantities that far exceed the eventual net sales. When I asked an audience of about a hundred at a symposium on The Crisis in Publishing how many of them had bought a first novel during the past year, four people raised their hands. *Read* a first novel? The number went up to seven.

Not only do readers and writers not read books, they don't read magazines, either. Lots of magazines were once happy to publish the short fiction of America's best writers—look at Fitzgerald's career, for example—and to use several regular book reviewers; now the ones worth submitting manuscripts to can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The readership has dwindled away, and while the ugly anticultural habits of corrupt capitalists and advertisers have had something to do with the disappearance of a good periodical press, the absolute decline in readers is the fundamental fact. This means that a beginning writer must get a book contract: the varied sources of financial and moral income and support that he might once have looked for have vanished.

It is not true that publishers once kept the faith with novelists by giving them generous contracts that they are now too penurious or vulgar to offer. It is more correct to say that the entire economic structure in which publishers do their business has changed. Once, publishers were not expected to be the sole source of income for novelists, and it was unheard of for them to give advances on fiction before it was written. It was also unheard of for them to take back from booksellers unsold copies of books they had published several months or years before. And of course it was unimaginable that the cost of money at the bank would hover between 15 percent and 20 percent—a factor that requires both publisher and bookseller to be very cautious indeed. Now it is all different. If publishers are, in the 1980s, reminding authors that it is scarcely likely that they can offer lucrative contracts when there is no likely source of funds, they are not abandoning some well-observed ethical code. They are simply reminding writers of what has always been true: publishers are an adjunct of the bookselling business, an intermediary between author and public. If the books are not selling, the publishers will not have money to offer authors, much less money to advance for a book not yet completed.

Publishers became sources of income for writers concurrently with, and because of, the enormous increase in literacy and hence in readership—a well-known eighteenth-century development. They were a far sight better as patrons than aristocrats or royals had been for the same reason that they are superior, in my view, to universities and foundations today—namely that their support gives some indication that there is a public for the writer's work and a sense of what that public is. Having this public, and writing for it, can liberate the novelist from the obligations placed on him by other benefactors, who expect certain social, political, pedagogic or artistic benefit from his work. Writing for a reader—as opposed to any other patron—liberates the novelist to do what he must, to be novel. Imaginative fiction springs to life in the ineffable transaction between writer and reader, and this happy symbiosis is the only guarantee of health—it is the basic prerequisite for the spiritual health of the novel, as much as it is for the financial well-being of the novelist.

The novel as a literary form presumes a narrative story about people, and it has always placed a high value on the presentation of social fact as well as psychological truth and moral worth. The novel developed as a dependable, capacious storytelling genre for the increasing number of middle-class readers who could be reached and who wanted to be reached without the interference

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of the classical allusions and high themes known only to the well-educated elite. Simultaneously, the novel—in its disparate, protean way—was a vehicle for antibourgeois sentiments, and the form itself encouraged the anti-novel. Many of the greatest novels in the canon are anti-novels: *Tristram Shandy*, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Ulysses*. There are more up-to-date examples—works that subvert, invert, even pervert the essential givens of the novelistic form even as they celebrate them. That is why we love novels: because they sustain these paradoxical and conflicting imaginative fictions. Because they advance our understanding of human society, of the narrative of human life and death, even while they complicate and confuse it. Because they tell us what we already know, but in a novel way.

Novels were able to nourish these paradoxes only on a flood tide, what Henry James eighty years ago called "the huge, homogeneous, and fast-growing population from which the flood of books issues and to which it returns." "Whatever the literature already is," he went on, "whatever it may be destined yet to be, the public to which it addresses itself is of proportions that no other single public has approached." There is an amplitude and a vigor about the novel that demands this big readership, and a good novelist has a matching generosity of vision and social understanding, however cynical, despairing or hostile *he* may be. James observed that the increasing number of readers wonderfully well supported the particular, individualistic fictions at which American writers seemed especially apt—it had something to do with the diversity, relative youth and huge expanse of the American nation. In other words, American readers encouraged many small publics—regional, political or artistic—within this large public, and many styles of readership—mass, midcult and highbrow.

But none of this is possible, none of it at all, if nobody reads, if the literary culture not only thins out but wears out, if it declines not only in quality (an old gripe) but in quantity. Then the very force that gave the novel life will take it away. In the contrary, vexed and uncertain culture of today, novelists are not well supported by their readers, and this is one of the principal reasons they can no longer be sure what the genre is, what it is for, what it can do.

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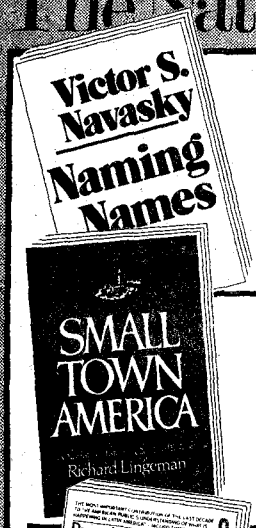

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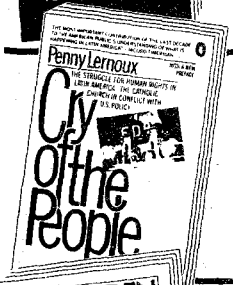

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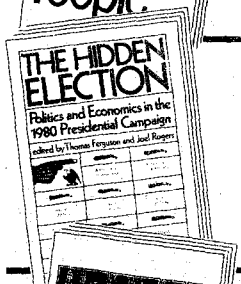

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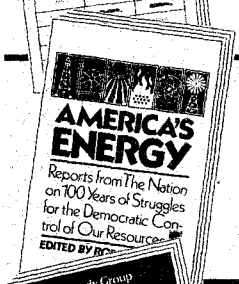

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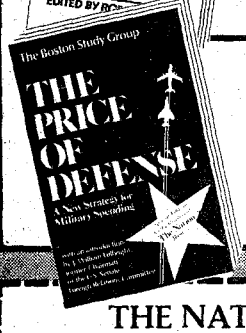

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of novels we reject each year, is an out-of-focus, dysfunctional, sometimes poignantly warped manifestation of this new ill health in the mutual life of novelist and reader. We see fossilized novels; we see desperate efforts to make fiction without the usual nutrient soil and the usual fertilizing social contact—hydroponic novels; we see anxious homage paid to novels of the past; we see heartless repetitions of a style and form that once was alive; we see extraordinary amounts of purposeless fiction. Perhaps the novel is not a vital genre any longer. Or if it is, it has changed beyond recognition. I think European and Latin American writers know this; they are busy writing and reading books that are very good fictions indeed, but that are surely not novels. Borges, García Márquez, von Rezzori, Grass, Calvino and Kundera don't write novels. They are writing significant, moving, original fictions, but are they novels?

You will say that you've heard all this before, and certainly there have always been prophets of doom about literature. My point is that usually the doomsayers were angry because they thought the increasing quantity of bad literature and poor readers was driving out the good, the true and the beautiful; because the best stuff was not being supported with appropriate respect and enthusiasm. But in the modern age, high literature has not been created except in a context provided by widespread habits of readership across broad sectors of the population. And for the first time since the early eighteenth century, that readership is declining.

Still, publishers and editors are creatures of habit, and it is our habit to believe that our writers will refashion, re-create or reimagine the social and literary world that sustains them and that they so bravely replenish and inspirit. Lacking, and happy to lack, a coherent view about what a novel is or should be, we editors will go on evaluating, and pushing to publish, the best works of the literary imagination we can find, whatever the genre or type. We have to make up our minds on these fictions long before the critics and scholars tell us what they are—and long before we know whether anyone will read them. How do we know what we think till we see what the writers say? We want to see what they say. We abound in hope that we can publish it, but that depends on readers. □

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The Genre Ghetto

MICHAEL DIRDA

Some years ago, I started reading what is usually described as "genre fiction." Eventually, many of my friends began to wonder what I saw in Philip K. Dick's metaphysical science fiction and Edmund Crispin's whimsical mysteries, in David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus* and Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, in horror stories, fantasy and thrillers.

Quite simply I liked them and found them models of workmanship and storytelling, and I was puzzled that such good books didn't have a wider audience. What's more, I came to resent the cavalier manner in which their authors were dismissed: if they were really so good, the argument went, they would be better known; if they were well known—a best-selling writer like Dick Francis, for instance—their work was waved aside as mere lowbrow entertainment.

Obviously plenty of trash rolls out of the world's Selectrics, but only genre fiction is characterized by its worst, least ambitious productions. As Theodore Sturgeon once observed, 90 percent of everything is crud. Yet since publishers aim their publicity at special-interest groups, few reviews of these books appear outside fan magazines, and so the serious reader finds it difficult to learn much about the better genre titles. Meanwhile, Gregory Benford's *Timescape*, perhaps the best novel about science since C. P. Snow's *The Search*, is scarcely known beyond science fiction circles.

They order these matters better in France. There, Clifford Simak's science fiction classic of a very American desolation, *City*, became a *succès de scandale*. Similarly, in Britain, Brian Aldiss is regarded as a man of letters, and helps judge the prestigious Booker Prize; here we scarcely notice his books because they carry the stigma "sci-fi." West Germany recently banned Norman Spinrad's *The Iron Dream*: in it Adolf Hitler emigrates to America at an early age and eventually becomes a pulp sci-fi writer, author of *Lord of the Swastika*. But in the United States no one seems to care enough about this disorienting satire on fascism and fiction.

Michael Dirda is the deputy editor of The Washington Post Book World.

The main reason for this neglect is the continuing dominance of the social, bourgeois novel among both critics and publishers. We prize, or at least praise, books about "the way we live now," while passing over major works of speculative fantasy like Gene Wolfe's intricate and beautifully written *The Book of the New Sun*. Whatever happened to catholicity of taste, to a "library without walls"? As C. S. Lewis once remarked, "We must not allow the novel of manners to give laws to all literature." After all, stories of adventure and marvels—myths, sagas, epics and chivalric romances, allegories, fairy tales and Platonic parables—have played a larger part in the literary history of the world than realistic fictions.

Still, some people refuse to pick up any book, no matter how good, labeled science fiction. Until recently fairy tales were also regarded as one-dimensional amusements for children; now, only after exhortations by Bettelheim, Sale, Cott and Calvino, have we been prepared to find these narratives not only delightful but also rich in their implications, subtle in their artistry. So too the novels of Hammett, Chandler and Cain, belatedly recognized as classics of American literature.

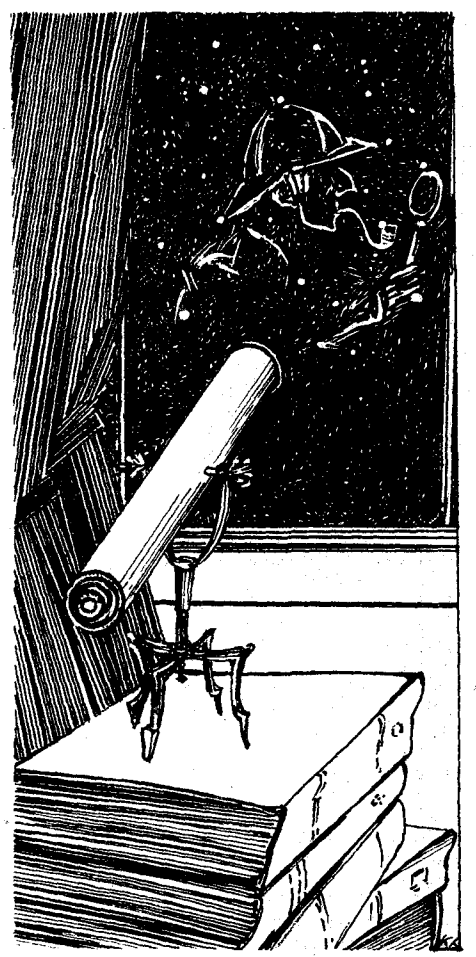
All of which suggests that we deserve more good criticism of genre work: the role of the critic should be to get past the labels of the marketplace and open up historical novels, mysteries and speculative fictions to an audience of serious readers. Eudora Welty, for example, accomplished this for Ross Macdonald. But taste and discernment are necessary. Science fiction fans and detective story addicts may provide a writer with a stable audience, but indiscriminate enthusiasm and clubhouse protectiveness also prevent exceptional work from reaching a general readership.

In characterizing most genre fiction as "adventure" stories, we miss what is important about their differentness. While our novels of manners deal with ordinary life in an extraordinary way, genre fiction, or adventure stories, usually presents extraordinary things as though they were part of the ordinary. Instead of concentrating on life's confusions and crises, they emphasize clarity in the midst of chaos, intelligence and skill over sensibility and *angst*. The detective, the secret agent, the scientist, the gunfighter all act with deliberation, reason and self-possession amid violence and possible defeat. While our sense of self-worth is depleted by the real world, fantasy and speculative romance renew us for further contact with that outside.

The strongly archetypal quality to genre fiction has long been recognized. The wise old man, the White Goddess, the Mana figure, the night journey, death and resurrection—these figures and patterns frequently recur. Moreover, the movement of starkly conventional figures through a strong plot across a stylized background can generate bold literary effects: the sense of wonder, for example, dominant in science fiction, the brooding presence of the land characteristic of the western; the magus-like aura of the detective in mysteries.

But sadly these are the very qualities that inhibit literary esteem. Critics, shying from both the traditional and the truly innovative, reward the mildly new, the unthreatening work that gently stretches a form. And as genre fiction usually conforms to an extreme neoclassical ethic, it tends to be dismissed.

Rereadability is a critical issue here.



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Wilde claimed that a book that couldn't be read over and over again shouldn't be read at all. Yet can one enjoy detective fiction if one knows who done it? It would seem so, for plenty of men and women return regularly to Sayers, Chesterton, Conan Doyle, Chandler, Francis. Obviously these writers' books provide more than plot complications and resolution: readers, finding a constant refreshment, approach them as works of art and craft, value the delicate play of light and shade in *The Man Who Was Thursday*, the quest-romance of *Farewell, My Lovely*, the pacing of *Forfeit* and *Whip Hand*.

Once taken seriously, genre fiction can supply our various schools of criticism with new material. Consider the sociological approach: mysteries tend to be social commentaries, and often social comedies; science fiction, which seems to be about the future, often turns out to be about our recent past; thrillers depict the way we think governments operate; westerns, evoking the lost frontiers of pioneer America, recall lost values and a usable past.

Other schools of criticism, such as the morphological, might clarify the essential patterns of the various popular forms. For instance, mysteries end with the triumph of the mind, thrillers with that of the will, horror stories with a return of the repressed and science fiction with a vision of the sublime.

One might also trace the modulations of a single theme. In the mystery sex is most often adulterous, in the thriller casual, in the horror tale kinky or violent and in science fiction romantic or novel. Why? Because for the mystery, adultery is a furtive, unlawful transgression; because the perfect agent in a thriller should be without personal attachment, a near-robot like Adam Hall's Quiller; because kinky sex or rape creates the essential condition of the uncanny for the horror tale by juxtaposing the familiar and the forbidden, the attractive and the alien; because the sublime suits science fiction, a form which is essentially optimistic, devoted to awakenings and enlarged possibility.

Some readers may feel that such critical attention could injure the mystery, the science fiction novel or the thriller, ladening these entertainments with pretension and overt purpose. Perhaps, but certainly not for long. Although the puritan within may insist that literature be uplifting, soul wrenching or at the least symbolic, delight will always matter most. Of course, that delight may take various forms, some more sophisticated than others; but people can still enjoy the circus even if they like the opera. Only publishers, branding books with faint phrases, fail to encourage readers to look beyond the best-seller list. Too bad. There are some good books hidden among the genre titles out there, which await the independent-minded reader who will take to heart Randall Jarrell's advice: "Read at whim! Read at whim!" □

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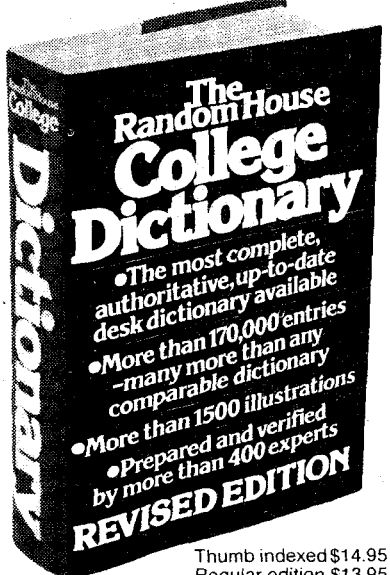
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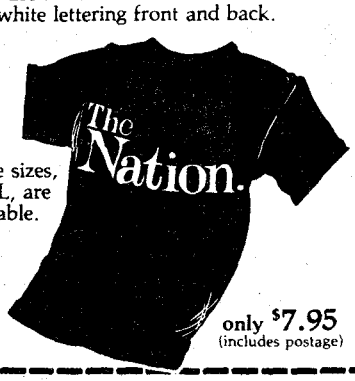

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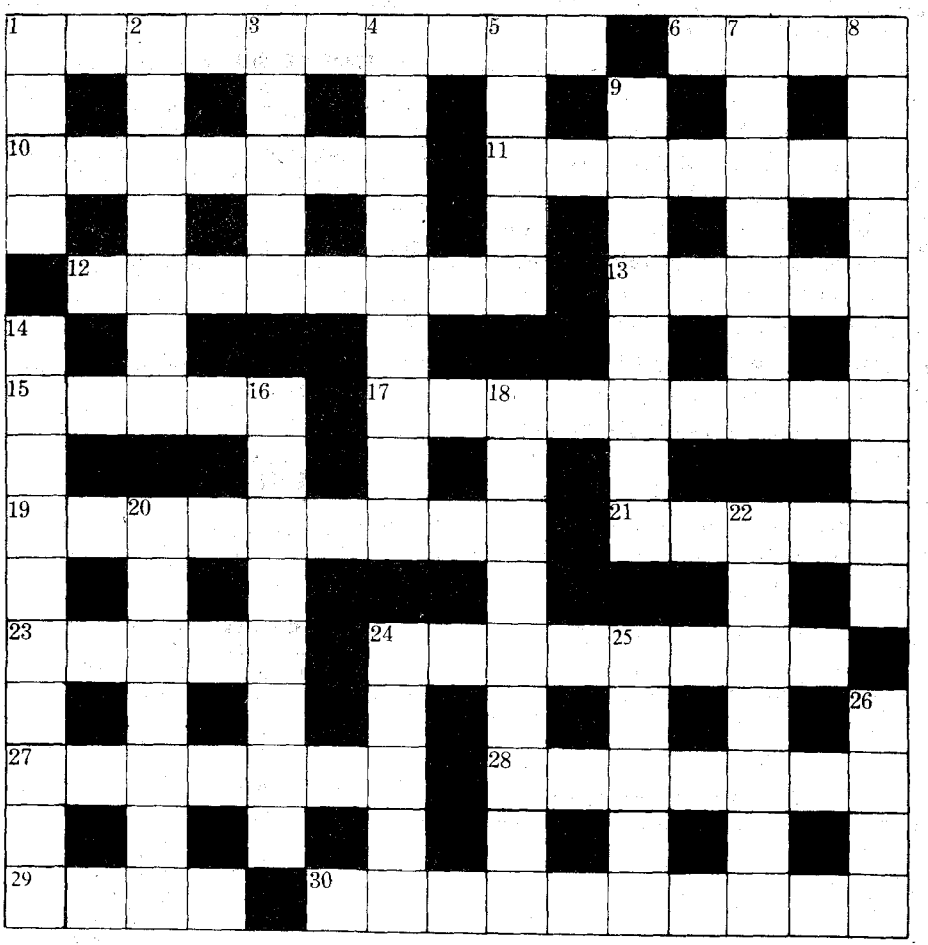

ACROSS

1 Announcement of an evening celebration? (Those who come are bound to be in it.) (10)
6 Came out on top. (4)
10 The "highwayman," possibly, is guided by it. (7)
11 An unusual little piece, sometimes called "Rabbit." (7)
12 Wordsworth did it all by himself, somewhat nebulously. (8)
13 Jewish general, or just a funny little fellow on the stage. (5)
15 Possibly responsible for the line of a king. (5)
17 Appellation for a Henry who was 15. (9)
19 Such things have nothing to do with the case. (9)
21 Hurries to bring a little old violin back. (5)
23 Change, but change later. (5)
24 I lecture for those who tend to their knitting. (8)
27 Stadia put on such performances, proving it's nothing to write a song. (4-3)
28 This needle's too big for a 24. (7)
29 Sounds like double work for the tailor, and mediocre, at that! (2-2)
30 Someone might have done before going to lunch with Union members. (6,4)

DOWN

1 How it looks when wary? (4)
2 Work hard for this, catching part of the raven by the tail. (7)
3 One who might have 12 brings a well-known friend back. (5)
4 Candidates pass in art with some difficulty. (9)
5 When an animal is, it either feels or tastes better. (5)
7 Secretaries in governmental service, or just where they have to look for things? (7)
8 When private, it's your own business. (Come in and use the bar, possibly!) (10)
9 Are grand, when so different! (8)
14 The cost of brick-work doesn't imply the lodgers are. (10)
16 Conspire to send one up? Its way may be permanent. (8)
18 These imply someone's calling. (9)
20 Needle-workers in rags. (7)
22 He lost his head? Capital! (7)
24 Such delivery used to be free. (5)
25 One believes in it. (5)
26 An over-pass for the boss, in short? (4)

SEE LAST WEEK'S SOLUTION AT LEFT

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